ヘクセイタス・プロジェクト
Judgement -罰- 氷点下一九五度の救済

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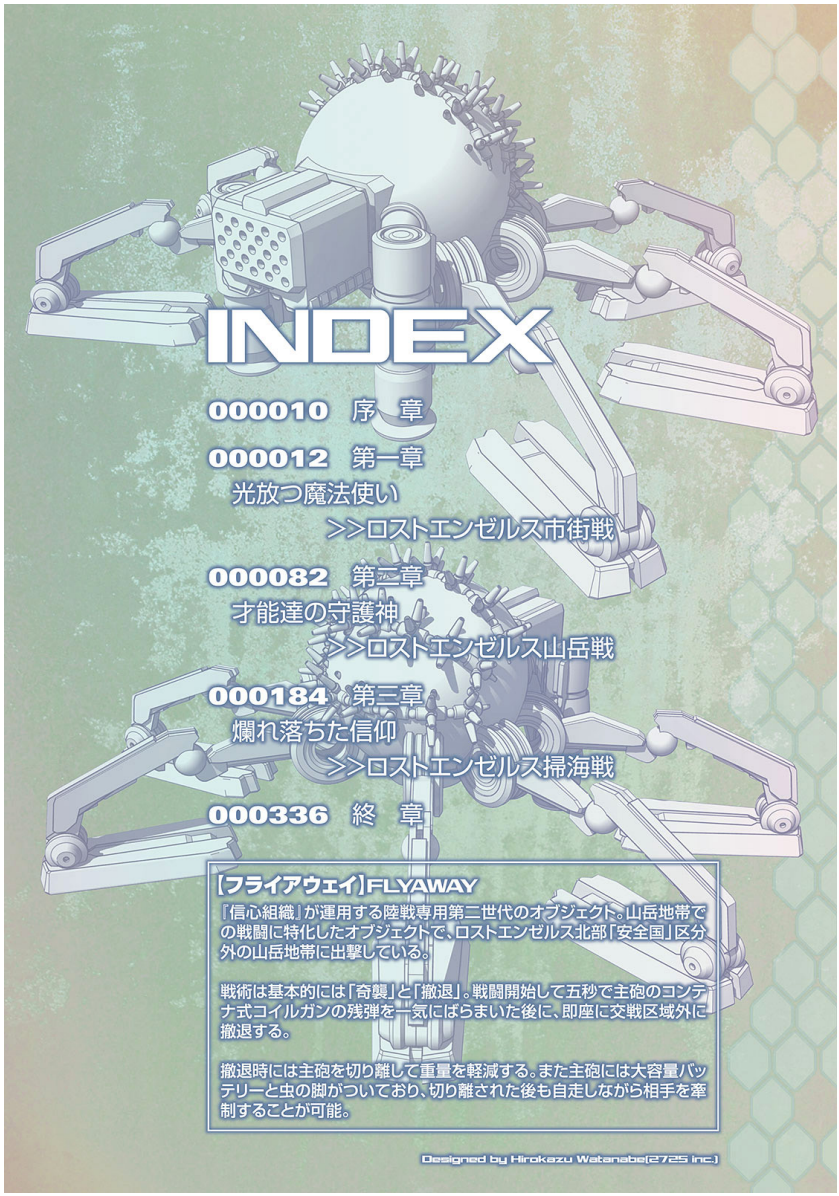
凪良 NAGIRYO

電撃文庫

Heavy Object - Volume 09 — Judgement -195°C



index

■ Illustrations

- Prologue
- Chapter 1: Light-Emitting Magician > > Urban Battle of Lost Angels
- Chapter 2: Guardian Deity of Talent > > Mountain Battle of Lost Angels
- Chapter 3: Obsessive Faith > > Ocean Battle of Lost Angels
- Epilogue
- Afterword
- Credits

ヘクティクスエクリプス

Judgement -出でよ 氷点下一九五度の救済

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結局、戦争はなくならなかった。
でも、変化はあった。
――超大型兵器オブジェクト。
それが、戦争の全てを変えた。

ヘヴィオブジェクト
HEAVY OBJECT

Judgement -195℃ 氷点下一九五度の救済

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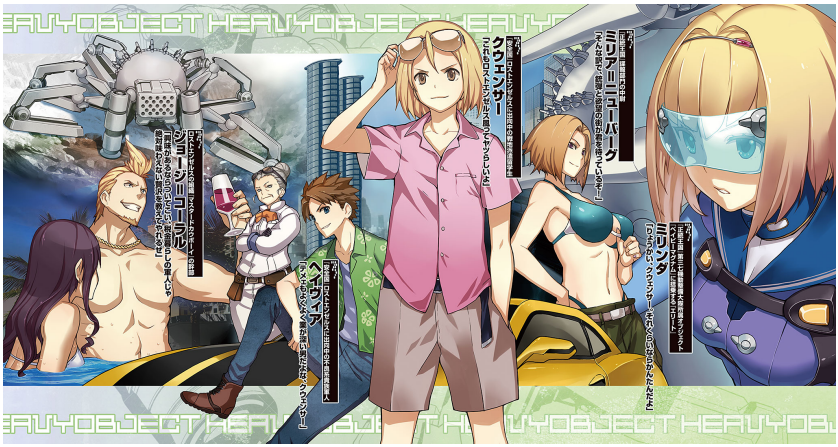
post/elite


ミリンダ
「ひょうかい、クウェンサー、それくらいならうんたんよ」
ミリア＝ニューバーグ
「そんなに強くて、経験と技術が抜群で怖くないスキル！」
クウェンサー
「これがロスト・テンサウザンド持ちってヤツらしいよ」
ヘイヴィア
「タメぐらいくらく言いやがったな、クウェンサー」
シーン＝コーラル
「ロスト・テンサウザンドの可能性を秘めた新人たち」

自由と災厄の街、ロストエンゼルスへようこそ!

ここは午後のにわか雨みたいな感覚で
流れ弾が飛んでくる事と、
どこの店を覗いてもチキンバーガーばかりなのを
除けば概ね良い街だ。

―とある軍事諜報部員の軽口―

HEAVY OBJECT

Judgement −195℃

ヘヴィーオブジェクト
氷点下一九五度の救済

鎌池和馬
KAZUMA KAMACHI

Prologue

Welcome to Lost Angels, the city of freedom and disaster!

If you're sick of your parents, teachers, childhood friend next door, best friend, lover, nuns, counselors, and everyone else who won't quit nagging you, then come on down for some fun with only a sports bag under your arm. You'll learn all too well just how much they were worried about you and just how much danger there is packed into the small box we call "the world".

If you follow the whitewashed guidebook and visit all the famous sightseeing spots, you might just be stripped of all your possessions after twelve hours and shark food after twenty four, but there's nothing to be afraid of. As long as you follow these simple rules, outsiders can enjoy themselves just fine.

1. Always pay attention to where the surveillance cameras are located and turn right around if you see one's broken.

2. From 9 PM to 5 AM, don't take a step outside your hotel no matter what happens.

3. You can't stop yourself from happening to look at people with a sharp look in their eyes, but make sure you don't take a second look.

That should probably cover it.

The first two are stupidly obvious, but the last one's the tricky one. This city of two million has four violent gangs lurking in it and those are just what's officially announced. And these gangs aren't wearing black suits on the sandy beaches of everlasting summer, nor are they blasting hip hop from outdated boom boxes on their shoulders in this age of internet music.

They blend in to everyday sights, like the middle-aged man handing out tissues on the roadside or the bikini girl brushing sand from her ass on the beach. So here, you can't cast off your shame, get a swelled head after drinking too much, pick a fight with just anyone, or hit on just anyone. But if you want to be stuffed in a wooden box and turned into a piece of living concrete artwork, then be my guest.

You can just run to the police? Your uncle's a government worker, so you have connections?

That's useless in this city.

The gangs lurking here aren't like your normal "team" or "family".

Will this be enough for you to catch on?

Watch out for those with an overly sharp look in their eyes. Watch out for those "soldiers sans uniform".

Chapter 1: Light-Emitting Magician > > Urban Battle of Lost Angels

Part 1

It was designated a safe country belonging to the Faith Organization.

The Coromandel Region was a narrow strip of coast running north to south along the Indian Ocean and a military port and industrial city were located on the southernmost end.

“So I’m finally here in Lost Angels.”

Quenser Barbotage muttered to himself as he walked through the international airport’s lobby.

He wore a thin tropical shirt and shorts instead of his usual military uniform. He also wore pale sunglasses, but they looked frighteningly out of place on him. He pulled a cellphone from his sports bag and switched it on. He had been instructed to turn it off during takeoff and landing, but he could not relax with that signal cut off even momentarily.

He already had a few missed calls, so he called back one of them.

The call was to Heivia Winchell who was quickly becoming a close yet awful friend.

“I’m in the airport now. Aren’t you coming to pick me up?”

“Why would I head out into that godawful heat to see some filthy guy? I’m not taking a step outside this air conditioned room.”

“Wait, what about the beach? I thought Lost Angels was filled with girls whose horniness is barely contained in a swimsuit?”

“Yeah, but with all the money they’ve clearly spent on their skin, who knows what organization’s mistress they are. Are you sure you want to play a game of concentration where a single mistake means having your balls torn off?”

“Can I leave right this instant? You just killed any hope I had for this city.”

“Shut up, hail a taxi, and get your ass over to the hotel. It’s the Luxury Coast Hotel. …Well, there are five hotels with the exact same name, but you’ll get here if you tell the driver to turn off Muscat Street at the museum and head straight down Palm Street.”

Quenser hung up and left the airport building.

His entire body was immediately assaulted by a sweltering heat. It was enough to completely forget it was May, but the heat was not all that surprising since the city was farther south than Hawaii.

He could immediately tell how safe this city was by the old man with a cigar blatantly taking a bunch of crumple-up money from several women and by the masked men sneaking up behind the old man like it was all some kind of skit.

A group of teenage boys and girls – likely from a safe country somewhere – were being led around by a tour guide. Quenser glanced over at the **School Trip Students** who were boarding a tour bus as he hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take him to the Luxury Coast Hotel as instructed.

“That’ll be taking the long way around,” said the driver.

“That’s fine. Just follow that obvious route.”

The coolant must have been losing its effectiveness because the taxi’s air conditioner was barely working.

A small monitor was installed on the back of the front seat and it silently played an ad for health foods that looked like they would make you sick, a magic show where a passenger plane was made to disappear, and news about a civilian long-term space flight project that was cancelled due to energy problems, but Quenser was not watching any of it.

His eyes were focused outside the window.

The large street was lined with colorful flowers and palm trees and fine beach-like sand covered the ground. All of the buildings were polished and sparkling like a mirror, so it felt like being exposed to the concentrated fire of a giant solar cooker.

Before long, Quenser's phone rang.

"What is it, Heivia? You can tell I'm having a bad day when I get more than one call that isn't from a girl."

"Just listen. I forgot to tell you something. Let me tell you about a certain 'specialty' found on Muscat Street. Try opening the window and holding out the phone. Hold on tight because you'll be the one who suffers if you drop it."

"What's this about? I'm not innocent enough believe those rumors about a sixty kph wind feeling like a D-cup, you know?"

Quenser complained, but he did as he was told. And with the air conditioner barely working, he had no problem with opening the window.

Right at that moment, the taxi passed a black bulletproof car that had come to a brief stop.

The luxury car was protected by escort vehicles, its window was open, and an elderly man with silver-gray hair was leaning out.

As a disgustingly insincere show of charity, he may have been calling over a child wanting to wash his windows for some loose change.

But…

Quenser's hand struck the top of his head.

Something glittered and a toupee that had to have cost five thousand euros flew through the air.

Quenser paled when he heard laughter coming from his phone.

"What did you just make me do!?"

He then heard angry yelling from behind the taxi. Screeching tires followed and the taxi driver sensibly began driving more dirtily to deal with the pursuit.

After ignoring around three traffic lights, the gun-toting group of vehicles was finally cut off by a stream of cars.

The driver did not turn around, but he did show Quenser his middle finger.

“Next time! That’ll cost extra!!”

The fact that he did not just say “never do that” seemed to be the Lost Angels style.

After losing their pursuers, the rattling taxi pulled up to Quenser’s destination. He handed over the set fare as well as a rather large tip, left the taxi, and gave an annoyed comment.

“How is this a ‘Luxury Coast Hotel’? It’s a run-down motel.”

It looked a lot like a two-story apartment building. The stairs and corridors were on the outside, so they would probably be soaking wet on a rainy day with any kind of wind. Simply having this place chosen for his lodgings was enough to know he was going to be making anything but bright and shining memories here.

He received a text with timing so perfect he felt he was being watched.

The subject was only a three-digit message and the body was blank.

He found the indicated room number and lightly knocked on the first-floor door.

The door opened to reveal a studio apartment sized room with all four walls packed full of military computers.

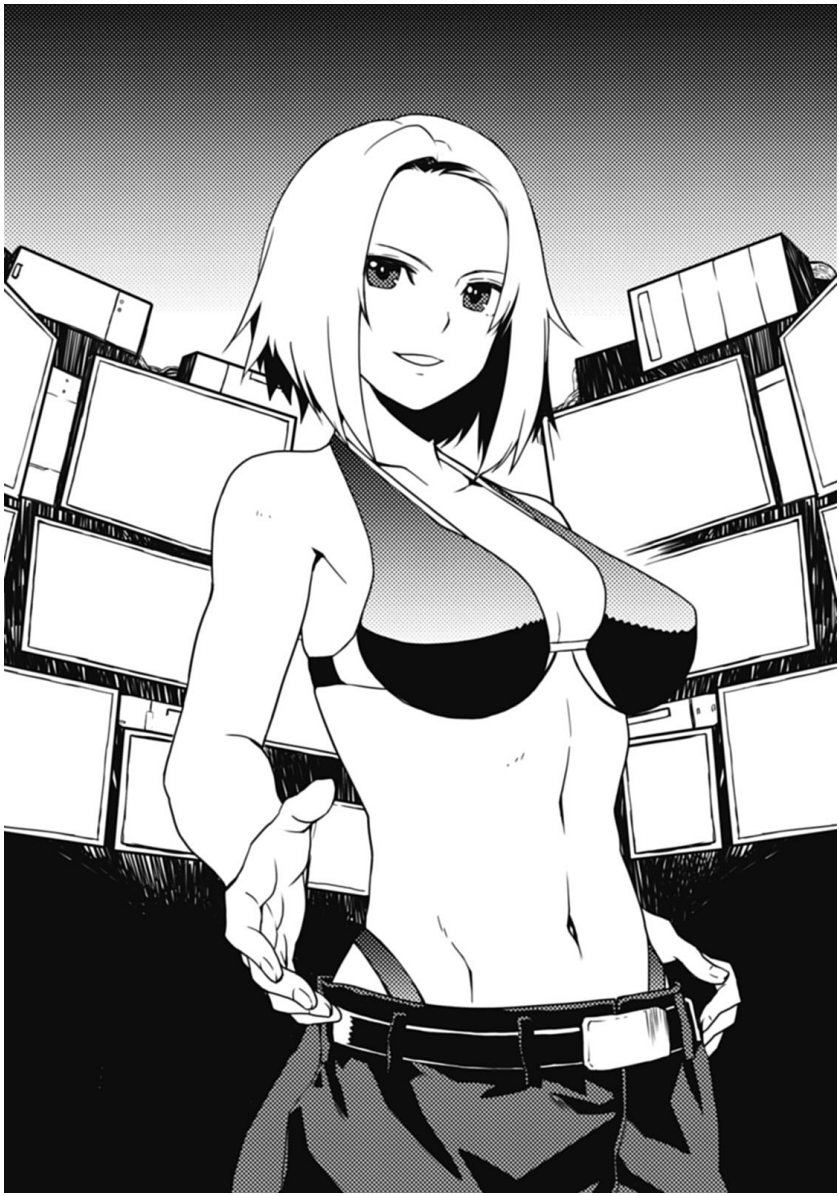
“Hurry up and get in. We don’t want what’s in here exposed for too long.”

Heivia Winchell wore a Hawaiian shirt and jeans instead of his usual military uniform. After closing the door, the room grew as dimly lit as a home theater. While doing what his awful friend said, Quenser looked around in annoyance.

“A cramped room, a ton of strange computers, and nothing but soldiers? And you have the air conditioner on full blast to combat all the stuffy heat? Have you ever heard of the World Clock, Heivia? It’s because of stuff like this that mankind’s lifespan is being worn away.”

“Oh, shut up. Don’t forget that those useless humanitarian commercials use up energy too. I’m not listening to people who think they’re the exception.”

“How many days ago was it that you were rejoicing over getting to do an actual analyst’s job for once? What have you been doing in this cave of junk?”



“There are five people who outrank me in this cramped room. I’m sure you’ll figure out what’s going on by the time the introductions are over.”

However, no one was wearing their uniform, so none of them had rank insignia on their shoulders. The woman with short blonde hair

seemed to be in charge, but she was wearing baggy cargo pants and a bikini top.

“You’re Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage, I take it. I’m Millia Newburg. I’m from the intelligence division and my rank is lieutenant. Nice to meet you.”

“Eh? Oh, right.”

“This is a pretty nice city if you ignore how bullets fly around like an afternoon shower and no restaurant has anything but chicken burgers. Now, let’s discuss some details.”

Millia pressed a button on a projector remote and the image appeared on the roof for some reason.

“With all the machines in here, this was the only surface left.”

“Is this…a map of Lost Angels?”

“You can’t get by in this city just by glancing through the airport pamphlet, so I’ll give you some basic knowledge. First of all, Lost Angels is located on the southernmost point of the Indian subcontinent. It belongs to the Faith Organization and its classified as a safe country, but it’s actually one of the least safe places you can be and people die more easily than on your average battlefield.”

The map of the city was divided into four different colors.

There was no obvious pattern, so it looked like bizarre bright camouflage.

“This is the division of power in Lost Angels. You could call it the territories of the four organizations that are causing this city to rot. But don’t rely on it too much. They all make sure to deliver for your convenience. Assume you’ll have lead flying your way no matter where you are.”

The bikini officer pressed another button on the remote and a red circle surrounded one point on the map.

It was the cape at the far south of this southern city.

“This right here is what’s led to all this. The Faith Organization has a large facility for Object construction and maintenance here.

Currently, the second generation Collective Farming is moored there. Subsidies are pouring in in the name of stimulating the region, so everyone's lost the will to do any real work. Everyone just assumes they'll have money, so they spend it all on gambling, prostitutes, and insane 'rock candy'. But as soon as their own habits leave their wallets empty, they get mad and go on a rampage. This is a city of two million where everyone's the kind of embarrassing adult who acts like a child throwing a tantrum. And all while holding handguns and odd-smelling grass."

"…"

"Feeling blue? Well, you just have to understand that I wouldn't exactly recommend going swimming here. More importantly, do you have the phone our division lent you? Let me see it."

"Um, you mean this?"

Quenser held out the cheap cellphone he had been using and Millia tossed it to Heivia. Heivia stuck a broad belt-like cable into the phone's bottom connector to link it to the computer.

"Here we go, here we go, here we go. This is just what we wanted! This is Mr. Mayonnaise's final puzzle piece!!"

"Who?"

"A crazy old man who smothers everything from curry noodles to Mont Blanc in mayo. But he's the boss of the Faith Organization's state-run factory, so we needed his biometrics for our operation."

"You mean like his fingerprint and blood?"

"He started getting cautious after we'd collected a few of them. We only needed his heartrate pattern, but that meant someone had to hold their nose and get right in the smelly gorilla's face. Just as we were going to play rock-paper-scissors to see who had to do it, we heard you were on your way. So thanks, Quenser. You won't get a bonus for your trouble, but we appreciate it."

Quenser recalled passing by a luxury car with several escort vehicles on the taxi ride here. He had unintentionally knocked a man's toupee off and nearly been killed.

He must have been told to take such a roundabout way to the hotel in order to match the man's schedule.

“I need to punch you later, but can you really use this? Won’t they have noticed what we’re doing and be on their guard?”

“Using biometrics is secure, but you can’t change them once they’ve been stolen,” explained Heivia. “He’s probably sweating bullets right about now. He can’t recover from this mistake, so I doubt that stupid mayo man will report it to anyone. We just have to take care of our job while he’s figuring out how to save his own skin.”

Heivia was in a pretty good mood for being forced into this city, but that may have been because he had actually gotten an analyst’s job for once. Then again, he was supposed to be a “radar” analyst.

However, a cloud fell over Millia Newburg’s face.

“That means we just have to take care of ‘that’.”

Quenser changed his mind and decided Heivia’s good mood was due to the beautiful woman in a bikini.

“Oh, so we’re going to do this the Lost Angels way?” asked the idiot.

“Yes. Although, if the people here were as clever as a London stockbroker, I wouldn’t have to worry so much.”

It may have been a comfort issue, but she tugged on her bikini’s central string with her index finger.

“We have no choice. I’ll gather the data and put together a definite plan. You two…I know. Heivia, you take Quenser with you to show him around while getting us a meal before we have to head out next. Anything’s fine as long as it isn’t curry or chicken, so buy enough for everyone. That’s all.”

Part 2

With that, Quenser and Heivia were stuck walking through Lost Angels during the afternoon.

The city seemed to use cars more than trains and there were also a lot of bicycles and inline skates. There must not have been much of

a distinction between the city and the beach because plenty of men and women were walking around in swimsuits.

“If we’re getting food, we should probably head up Apple Street and then down Pineapple Street.”

“Hm? But there are food carts set up right over there.”

“You don’t even want to know what’s in those. The sign might say chicken, but you’re lucky if it’s actually frog.”

There were no crosswalks in the area, so they ran across the wide street with horns blaring at them.

Quenser spoke up while passing by a **College Girl in a Monokini** who was taking a selfie with her smartphone.

“Everyone’s surprisingly defenseless for what I’d heard was a city of guns and crime.”

“That’s one of the digital exhibitionists. They purposefully carry around vulnerable smartphones and transmit their crazy personal life to the world 24/7. I do hear they make lovely bed partners for the people undercover here, though.”

The two idiots made their way into a small restaurant district. They ignored all of the restaurants with direct “takeout” counters and entered a large supermarket. There, they threw some random food into a cart: soft French bread, thick fillets of salmon, a few salads, anchovies, deli horse meat, canned olives, etc.

Quenser was clearly annoyed with the lineup in the cart.

“Are you planning a homemade hot dog party?”

“This one is sausage made out of the Island Nation’s tofu. If you let people choose their own ingredients, then it’s their responsibility if it doesn’t taste good. That’s a trick to slip free of your commanding officer’s ridiculous demands.”

“And why are you inspecting it all so closely? Can’t you just check the expiration date to see how fresh it is?”

“Don’t be stupid. Lost Angels’s transformer facilities are in the mountains and they’re so worn out that the power goes out all the time. If the refrigerators aren’t working, the food will often rot in its

packaging."

A young woman was working the register, but the employee training seemed to be decent because she had a pump-action shotgun casually leaning up against the counter. The sight was enough to make Quenser's balls shrivel up. Heivia seemed used to it, so he held out some Faith Organization money. That money did not seem real to Quenser and felt more like a toy.

With bags in both hands, they both left the automatic door.

"Heivia, couldn't we have driven?"

"I don't want to own a car here. In this city, people get one by breaking the window in the parking lot or hijacking it from someone waiting at a red light. It's like sharing a girlfriend with your roommates, so it just seems disgusting."

Heivia spat out that comment as they waited for a break in the cars and a **Pizza Deliveryman** on a scooter so they could cross the road.

Quenser wiped sweat from his brow.

"I really didn't think that would lead to all this."

"Yeah, you're clearly the one that caused this. Just because we're only trying to kill some time doesn't mean you can't take the discussion seriously. You may have been joking, but the higher ups will take it all seriously."

"Yeah, but…"

Quenser's complaint trailed off.

Suddenly, a **Hot Dog Stand** in a van exploded as it drove by in front of them.

The explosives flames and shockwave sent the mass of steel into the air. It flew from the road and began tumbling along.

"…!?"

Quenser fell to a sitting position and wordlessly flapped his mouth opened and closed.

He first thought it was a car bomb but quickly realized he was wrong.

He noticed a thin trail of smoke coming from the opposite side of the road. He followed it back and found a black SUV stopped about one hundred meters away with someone leaning out the back window.

That person threw away what looked like a large cylinder.

“A rocket!?”

“If you get what’s going on, then hide! C’mon, this way!!”

Heivia immediately abandoned the supermarket bags full of food, grabbed the back of Quenser’s neck instead, and dragged the other boy behind the flaming kitchen truck.

“Do gangs shoot those things in safe countries these days!?”

“In Lost Angels, they’re as common as seagull droppings.”

“First I knock off some guy’s toupee and now I’m caught in a gang war? What kind of first day is this? I came here because I’d heard its beaches had the highest topless rate in the world, but I’ve been seeing nothing but old men!!”

“What are you blathering about!? They fired that at us! And it’s not the topless rate this place is #1 in; it’s the nipple piercing rate, which is just disturbing! More importantly, you check for a sniper with the binoculars. I’ll take out the enemies I can see with my own eyes!!”

“Eh?”

Surprised, Quenser turned around and saw Heivia reach into the backpack he was wearing with only one shoulder strap.

He pulled out a submachinegun with a suppressor attached. It was such a tiny fully-automatic weapon that the suppressor actually looked larger than the gun itself.

“Eh?”

The student looked back and forth between Heivia who was loading the first bullet behind the burning kitchen truck and the five or six thugs approaching with shotguns in hand.

The delinquent soldier did not hesitate in the slightest.

He slaughtered those civilians with short bursts of muffled gunfire.

There were corpses everywhere.

“Ehhhh

someone else who can't live in any other city. Simply put, the city is half soldiers and half exiles. But it's obvious at a glance who are the predators and who are the prey. The girl at the supermarket register and this **Hot Dog Stand** are the same! This thing contains a giant illegal wireless router and the guy who runs it is a spy who steals data from all the devices around here!!"

"But wait. Why is the Faith Organization military a part of all this!? Isn't this their home turf!?"

"They've been forced to dirty their own hands to get rid of the people who they can't drive out through normal means. Anyway, the ones after us here are Information Alliance soldiers without their uniforms. If they're taking this seriously, we have no reason to hold back either!"

Quenser heard a horn coming from somewhere else.

A giant truck cut by, crashing into the side of a car that had just pulled into the intersection. The truck came to a sudden halt, blocking all traffic through the intersection and the container on the back opened like a giant treasure chest.

Heivia groaned when he saw what appeared from within.

"Oh, we're screwed."

It was a mass of composite armor and it measured somewhere from ten to fifteen meters tall when it stood up on the truck bed. It was definitely a weapon, but it intentionally retained a humanoid silhouette.

"Let's scram. We don't have the firepower for that thing! In fact, does it even still qualify as a powered suit!?"

"That's the kind of crazy thing you see at weapons shows! Y'know, like the lunar invasion tanks and personal-use jet engines that are clearly just someone having some fun with the tax money funding them!"

"Either way, that thing will be a demon straight from hell once it's ready to go. Let's get out of here before that macho man crawls out of his grave. Otherwise, people will start making amateur bets on how long we'll last! Come with me!!"

Countless bullets were already flying back and forth, so Quenser

crouched down and ran after Heivia.

Heivia contacted someone using a sturdy radio that clearly was not a normal cellphone.

“This is Blue 05, we’re currently engaged in combat with the Crimson Party. Yeah, as you know, that’s the Information Alliance’s hideout! We’re hopelessly outgunned, so we need to lose them. Find us some wheels to steal and an escape route!!”

“That will work perfectly,” replied Millia Newburg. “Keep them on your tail as you run down Pineapple Street to Mango Square. Get there in less than ten minutes and you’ll run into a group of transport vehicles from Mustard Cowboy…that is, the Capitalist Corporations. Having those two sides run into each other will give you more of a chance to escape, plus the Capitalist Corporations still have ‘that’ stolen. We can’t continue with our original operation until we take care of them. Can you do that for us?”

“Oh, I can’t believe this! Where’s a car I can steal!?”

“The guy on the large motorcycle at the front of those waiting for the light is with the Information Alliance.”

A short burst of muffled gunfire followed.

Shot in the leg, the driver fell to the road, but Heivia ignored him and righted the large motorcycle.

A **Female Police Officer** in a miniskirt was well within sight, but for some reason, she seemed to be doing her best to ignore everything that was going on.

“Damn this thing’s heavy!! Hurry, Quenser! If we don’t get going, that huge thing will catch up!!”

“I feel like I’ve wandered into a post-apocalyptic world!!”

Quenser shouted his complaints as he hopped onto the back of the motorcycle.

With both of them riding it, the large motorcycle took off with its tires scraping against the asphalt. The scenery quickly began to fly by.

“I’ll focus on driving, so you take care of the gun!”

“Do you really think a student like me can do that? And you try twisting around in this unstable position!”

Several engines roared like monsters as they began their pursuit. Quenser twisted around to check behind them and saw several black bulletproof SUVs approaching with no regard for the lane markers. They would hop into the air each time they crossed a short hill.

One of them opened its thick window and a man holding a carbine leaned out.

“Dammit! I’m gonna turn left at the next intersection, so lean!!”

“Why!? Isn’t straight the quickest way to Mango Sqaure!?”

“There’s an international theater up ahead! It’s where Crimson Party gets their funding and where the rich have their orgies! They have way more funding than a hideout in a run-down motel, so they’ve at least got guardhouses and enough security to make it a large-scale fortress!! So much as brush up against it and you’ll be filled with holes!!”

Heivia took a sharp turn at the intersection as he yelled his explanation. Quenser was slow to react and did not lean quite in time, so they just about toppled over. One of the pursuing SUVs crashed into a normal car in the intersection, started spinning, and nearly took out a telephone pole along with the **Worker** up at the top of it.

“Quenser! If you can’t use a gun, then at least pull out your phone! Hold it out!!”

“What good will that do!? Am I supposed to upload a picture to a social network!?”

“Run the app called #109 and then take a picture like it tells you to. The machine will take care of the rest!!”

Quenser did not understand, but he did as he was told.

As he was shaken back and forth, he placed one of the pursuing bulletproof SUVs in the center of the screen and took a photo.

The phone did not fire a strange deadly radio wave or laser beam.

Instead, an air-to-surface missile dropped from the heavens.

The explosion blasted the thick four-wheel vehicle straight upwards. It landed and tumbled over and over, dragging the SUVs behind it into the mess.

“What the hell!?” shouted Quenser.

“Look up. That’s a UAV called a Short Bow! Your phone is linked with the targeting system of the unmanned plane flying above us. Make sure you aim carefully. Just like a well-trained maid, that thing will obey even mistaken orders!”

Several of the bulletproof SUVs managed to steer around their destroyed allies and continue the pursuit, but then Heivia glanced over at the metal street sign.

It said Mango Square.

“Ha ha! We made it!!”

They saw three vans with all the windows covered in metal plates drive out of a narrow road behind a bank.

“That looks like a bank’s armored car and its escort team to me!”

“And that bank is from a chain run by the Capitalist Corporations’ gang. They also happen to be the bastards who stole ‘that’ from us. Hold on tight because we’re dragging them into this too!!”

“Ahh, ahh. I’m glad to see the hands of the World Clock are moving ever onward!!”

“Killing some villains is sure to extend mankind’s lifespan by a little!”

Heivia opened the throttle further and moved the large motorcycle closer to the armored vans.

They reacted quickly.

The rearmost of the three Capitalist Corporations’ vans threw open its back double doors, revealing what lay within.

“Dammit!! Another powered suit!?”

The humanoid composite armor was sitting with its knees up to fit

in the limited space.

An autocannon that resembled a steel spear passed between its legs and straight backwards.

“There’s nothing funny about a robot spreading its legs for you! What’s it targeting!?”

Heivia clicked his tongue and made a quick turn. He burst into the oncoming lane, putting an angle between them instead of distance, and entered their blind spot.

The powered suit fired almost immediately afterwards.

The repetitive explosive sounds were far too deep and the Information Alliance’s bulletproof SUVs and the asphalt they drove on were filled with holes as easily as a paper box. There were no screams or shouts. The road was simply blocked by flames and smoke.

Heivia observed that filthy gravestone in the rearview mirror and spat out a comment.

“They’re already all dead? Talk about useless!!”

“As I hope you know, our real target here is the Capitalist Corporations. Unless we take out that armored van, they’ll still have ‘that’ and we’ll have lost our chance to continue the operation.” Millia Newburg gave that coolheaded clarification over the radio, so she may have been observing them using the UAV overhead. “And if you take too long, you’ll be cut off by the Great Fence…the no-entry zone. Three kilometers north of the Object construction and maintenance facility on the southern cape is a double fence with machinegun-equipped guard towers. Nothing good will come of getting close to that, so hurry up and finish this.”

Heivia clicked his tongue.

“You heard her, student! Now order the Short Bow to blow away those escort vans!!”

“The phone’s antenna icon just died, so can I even use that anymore?’

“They’re jamming us now!?”

Heivia weaved in between the oncoming traffic that shot their way like arrows.

The rearmost of the windowless vans kept its back door open and tried to target them with the autocannon sticking lengthwise down the vehicle. Unlike a normal gun turret, it could not turn the barrel, but it was possible the van could swing its back end toward the motorcycle and put the two boys in the weapon's line of fire.

They were going to fail at this rate.

They could not escape the enemy's line of fire forever and focusing too much on that could easily lead to a collision with a completely unrelated car.

"Return to the original lane!" shouted Quenser. "Approach the van from the right!"

"Are you stupid!? We'll be torn to pieces the instant we enter that thing's line of fire!!"

"Just do it before we reach the next curve!! This is our first and last chance!!"

Heivia clicked his tongue and did as he was told, half out of desperation.

Naturally, the powered suit in the van reacted as soon as they entered its line of fire. The autocannon spewed 30mm bullets at frightening speed and the recoil was too powerful for a flesh-and-blood human to hope to contain.

But…

"What?"

A high-pitched screech rang out.

By the time Heivia realized it was the van's tires sliding to the side, the situation was already past the point of no return. The van completely lost its balance and toppled over. The sounds of bending metal and breaking glass followed.

"They kept firing that autocannon with its ridiculous recoil and the powered suit had already shifted the van's center of gravity, so of course it was going to knock itself over if it fired during that sharp

turn!”

“More importantly, watch out! It’s coming this way!!”

The large motorcycle just barely swerved out of the way of the approaching van and continued pursuit of the others.

Quenser looked down at this cellphone.

The antenna icon had recovered, so that rearmost van must have been the one jamming them.

The student immediately held up the phone and an air-to-surface missile dropped from the heavens three seconds later.

Like a large tree struck by lightning, the lead escort van was split in two.

The main armored van lost control after crashing into the exploding and burning escort van. It plowed into the sidewalk, collided with the traffic light pole, and bent in a V all the way up to the driver’s seat.

The large motorcycle’s engine roared wildly as it circled around and Heivia stepped down to peer in to the driver’s seat.

He raised his submachinegun in one hand and mercilessly fired inside the van.

The windshield quickly filled with white cracks, but there was no sign of the bullets getting through.

However, that was fine.

Heivia gave a shout to whoever was beyond the bulletproof glass.

“Get out, now!! We’re professionals! If you get that you can’t win this, then do what we say!”

“Heivia, what do we do now?”

“They’re with the Capitalist Corporations, so we’ll do what they’ll like least,” said Heivia. “We’ll blow away all the money in here with a missile! Pass this message on to Mustard Cowboy’s boss: ‘If we don’t get ‘that’ back unharmed, then we’ll keep doing this for as long as it takes. How about we wreck all of your luxury cars next time? Or would you prefer we soak your lovely golf course in weed

killer? Your luck ran out when you interfered with our work to earn a little extra cash!' And don't get a word or letter of that wrong!!"

Quenser sighed when he heard that and then whispered to the other boy.

"(If we're gonna burn it all, no one would know if we swiped a stack or two, right?)"

"(That's already part of the plan. But don't get greedy. Stuff too much below your clothes and you'll look like you're wearing a conspicuous bulletproof vest.)"

Part 3

An explosive rise in land prices had affected two different areas in Lost Angels: the west and the east. One was an ultra-luxurious residential district where every house had a jacuzzi and a live-in doctor and the other was filled with ultra-high rise buildings polished enough to look like mirrors.

Mustard Cowboy – and thus the Capitalist Corporations – had their base of operations in the latter area. A set of twin towers stood forty stories tall and one of them had a pool on the roof which was filled with hard rock and beautiful women in swimsuits year-round. No matter how much anyone tried to conserve, the hole in the bottom of the tank would never be plugged so long as people like this remained. The advocates of the World Clock had to be crying.

A bearded man sat in the chlorine-smelling water with paid-for woman on either side of him and he received a report from a male subordinate who looked like he deserved a label saying "abstinence".

The man was George Coral.

He did not even wear a swimsuit, leaving him nude except for his pure gold necklace, but that defenselessness was an indicator of his power. He did not need to use anything as a shield and he did not need anywhere to hide. If he fired ten thousand rounds into the nearest police station while puffing on a cigar, not a single siren would sound. It was because he had built up that system and

because he was protected by that system that George Coral was the organization's kingpin.

And while he achieved splendid results as a member of the Capitalist Corporations, he had also gained a thorough knowledge of the military's "barriers" and had created several loopholes for himself. And those loopholes were of course to hide the income from his side businesses that he did not want the military or state to get their hands on.

In other words, his life was much like these twin towers.

It had two pillars and one of those had started to fall. And sadly, when one of the twin towers collapsed, it took the other one with it.

He looked like he was enjoying the scent of one of the women's hair, but he actually had cold sweat pouring down the back of his neck as his subordinate on the poolside calmly spoke to him.

"Management has requested that 'Branch Manager Coral' provide them with an appropriate explanation. And not just about the lens incident. They would like to know about everything leading up to this…in other words, about all of your side businesses."

"…Ha…ha ha."

"The bank, the jewelry store, the art gallery, and the various transport vehicles. The attack by Azul Hive – in other words, the Legitimacy Kingdom – has led to losses reaching four hundred million. Also, we just received a telegram saying they 'hope to do similar business with you in the future'. Management is most interested in how you plan to settle this."

"There is no distinction between the public and hidden part of a business. Everything I did was to provide the funding we needed for our activities. Surely you understand that."

"Your answer please."

"If, hypothetically, I said I had no way of paying, what would happen to me?"

The poolside subordinate did not immediately answer.

Instead, the beautiful women in swimsuits playing in the water all turned to silently stare at George Coral.

The Capitalist Corporations had some truly unpleasant sayings.

Those who do not work, shall not eat.

When the money vanishes, so do I.

The cold wind on that forty story roof robbed the bearded man of his body temperature.

In this moment, the system of this city which had protected him for so long was being switched off.

When that “Branch Manager” finally grasped the situation, his subordinate resumed speaking.

“Some of the more extreme individuals at the emergency shareholders meeting back in the home country are saying we can demonstrate our good faith to Azul Hive with the return of the lens and a newspaper article about a jumper suicide.”

Part 4

By evening, “that” had been safely returned.

It was contained in a wooden box larger than a bathtub and protected by a lot of cushioning. Quenser peered at it on the back of a truck stopped in the motel’s parking lot.

It was made of tempered glass, it had an average thickness of twenty-five centimeters, and it had a diameter of two hundred centimeters.

“Now we can finally get back on track.”

Millia Newburg, their superior officer who wore a bikini top and baggy cargo pants, sounded satisfied.

Quenser on the other hand sounded annoyed (which may have had something to do with nearly getting the nickname Booby Boy for his failure at getting lunch).

“Are we really doing that?”

“According to Major Frolaytia Capistrano, this was your idea.”

“It was only a theory I came up with for a discussion to kill time! I never imagined it would be used in an actual operation! If I had, I’d have written up something more fun with lots of seducing women!!”

“Calm down. Either way, it’s an exciting and unprecedented operation. I’ve been in intelligence for a while, but you don’t often see a job that sounds like something right out of a spy movie.”

Millia smiled and placed a notebook-sized tablet computer on the edge of the wooden box.

It displayed an image created by combining the great many photographs they had taken up to this point.

It came together to form a collection of cutting edge military technology.

It had armor that could resist a nuclear strike.

It had an extremely powerful reactor and a colossal main cannon that transformed all that energy into destructive power.

It was synonymous with war.

The Legitimacy Kingdom’s enemy codename for it was Collective Farming.

The Faith Organization’s official name for it was Sarasvati.

“This is their Second Generation Object receiving maintenance in the construction and maintenance facility, isn’t it?”

“Besides its pure combat ability, it also has large-scale agricultural cultivation technology mainly meant for use in deserts. It’s a part of the Re Terra project meant to alter the entire planet’s environment. Restoring the environment sounds lovely, but it’s actually a weapon to invade the whole environment. Even the desert has its own endemic species, but this thing ignores all that and covers it all in its own plantation. That’s nothing but bad news for us. It would be especially bad if it expands the production of potatoes and corn. We can’t stop them when they claim to be doing it to combat food shortages, but they can actually turn it into biofuels and shake up the price of oil.”

Millia smiled with an oddly childish and mischievous light in her eyes.

“So it would be too boring to lie in wait and sink the thing. I was dumbfounded when I heard your idea to steal all the technology without putting a scratch on it. I was fed up with all the boring surveillance and interception, so make sure to let me join this party of yours, student.”

That was the plan.

It was fifty meters tall.

It weighed two hundred thousand tons.

The monstrous weapon’s magnificent form was visible from anywhere in the city.

But Quenser and the others would secretly and boldly steal it without putting a scratch on it and with everyone in that city of two million none the wiser.

Part 5

It was 8 PM.

Even at night, Lost Angels was not the least bit chilly and the filthy motel room was wrapped in an odd heat. It was enough to suspect the musty air conditioner and its old coolant had finally kicked the bucket.

“Let’s go back over the necessary conditions.”

Millia Newburg pulled on the central bridge-like string on her bikini top as she started talking.

“Our target is the Collective Farming, a Second Generation Object from the Faith Organization. And instead of destroying it, we’re going to steal it unharmed to get our hands on its tech.”

“Um,” said Quenser as he raised a hand. “I know I keep saying this, but that really was just a theory. Are you sure we have everything

needed to pull it off?"

"Don't worry. The large facility for constructing and maintaining Objects is the heart of Lost Angels. It's located on the southern cape and it's a no-entry zone protected by a double fence called the Great Fence and by machinegun-equipped guard towers. …Just as you read in the report. This is a city of two million, but all of the witness's eyes are turned in the same direction: southward. This should all go off without a hitch."

"The local residents…are foreign spies I guess. But ignoring them, what about the guards and surveillance cameras at the Faith Organization base? For that matter, what about UAVs and military satellites?"

"Nothing to worry about there," said Heivia. "Their Pilot Elite, Putana Highball, has extreme scopophobia, so she can immediately sense whenever someone's eyes or a camera are looking at her. That may sound like it makes her invincible, but it has a huge downside. When tuning up her mental side, she supposedly meditates inside her Object, remember? They have to move all of the guards and surveillance away during that time. Just by intercepting her meditation schedule, we have a time when everyone moves away from the thing."

"But the Object's own high-sensitivity sensors take over, right? If we get close, we'll still be blown away by the Collective Farming."

"That's what Mr. Mayonnaise was for," said Millia Newburg as she tugged down on her bikini's string. "He's the manager of the state-run factory, so we can use his biometric data to sneak into the Faith Organization's system. Since the maintenance port is open right now, we can overwrite the image displayed in the Collective Farming's cockpit. It doesn't matter if the sensors notice us as long as the information doesn't reach the Pilot Elite."

"To look at it another way, we don't get a second chance if we let this one go. The Pilot Elite's meditation spans several days, so if we tried to wait until the next time, the Collective Farming's maintenance would end and it would head out to another battlefield. This is our only chance."

"How's the ocean? Oh, and what about the lighthouse?"

Quenser persistently asked about everything and Millia diligently answered all of his questions.

She was likely doing so out of respect for the one who had thought up the plan while also making sure there were no discrepancies between their actual plans and the one in his head.

“About three kilometers south of the southern cape is a small island with nothing but a lighthouse on it. It was easy to take over. The soldiers were confused why they got a bonus for attacking something so insignificant, though.”

“How’s the weather? Is there actually going to be fog?”

“You’ll see when you step outside. Lost Angels is covered in a thick fog almost every night. It’s only a weather issue, but the place seems to transform into a city of perverts and eccentrics once the sun sets. When you spend too long faking your identity in enemy territory, even a spy can get fed up with the world. I still don’t see why that makes you head out into the night wearing nothing but a trench coat, though.”

“What about the model?”

Heivia cut in to field that question.

“You can thank the recent craze of 3D printers for that one.”

“The blackout?”

“There are a few ways to pull it off, but they won’t suspect any of them. The transformer equipment in the mountains is so run down that the power goes out all the time on a really hot day.”

“So that just leaves…the boat, the light source, and the lens.”

“You already know we have all that. We put our own lives on the line for that last one.”

Quenser fell silent and thought back over the idea he had put together.

Was anything missing?

Could they go ahead with what they had?

He thought and reached his conclusion.

“I can’t believe this. I’ve lost any reason to oppose this.”

“Then I guess your theory is about to enter reality.”

Millia Newburg smiled and threw her fist into the palm of her open hand.

“As a kid, I loved munching on popcorn as I watched spy movies. Now I kind of wish I’d gotten a tuxedo.”

Part 6

Putana Highball was a fifteen-year-old girl.

She had brown skin and her long black hair was tied back behind her head.

As the Pilot Elite of the Faith Organization's Second Generation Object named Sarasvati, her entire body was contained within the characteristic special suit. The primarily green skintight suit covered her from the top of her neck to the tips of her toes. The hat on her head and the miniskirt-like design was somehow reminiscent

of a nurse's uniform.

In a way, that was the very concept of her Object.

While the Sarasvati was a purely strategic weapon, a bedrock road roller that destroyed obstacles with its great weight and vibration was attached to the front and a cultivator was attached to the back. It used those devices to cultivate large areas of wasteland or desert in a short period of time and to construct long waterways and large-scale farms.

After all, it was named Sarasvati, a water goddess and the protector of wisdom.

This great machine used human technology to rule over both life and death and Putana was the one who controlled it.

That was why her special suit resembled a nurse's uniform. The Sarasvati would cut open the planet Earth, remove the lesion, pour in water, and give it new life. That directly led to prosperity for mankind. That Second Generation Object had been built to grant that very wish.

(…)

Putana Highball sank deep into her "seat" within a colossal weapon that could endure a nuclear attack, which also meant it was a more claustrophobic prison than being buried alive below the bedrock.

However, her seat was much different from the reclining chairs of a beauty parlor or a dentist's office.

Simply put, belts made of synthetic fibers stretched from various parts of the cockpit. Each of the countless belts attached to her special suit, was drawn taut, and distributed her weight so she hovered in midair as if sitting in an invisible seat.

Why would she use such a roundabout method? There was a simple reason.

(…)

With her eyes gently closed, she became strongly aware of the "gazes" moving across the surface of her body.

More than ten endoscope-like tubes wriggled around her and the

points of infrared laser light emitted from the end of the fiber optics constantly crawled across her body.

The movements on her skin's surface allowed them to accurately read the flow of her blood, the tension of her muscles, the movement of her organs, and other information. This system directly connected her to the Object's controls.

Putana Highball silently judged that, even in this state, she had yet to fully combine with Sarasvati.

When she did achieve that combination, it felt like having her human nerves reach every corner of the machine until she no longer saw any distinction between the two. When she reached that point, it was no longer the "gazes" inside the cockpit that she felt. The idea of being inside a machine left her mind entirely and all the many "gazes" running rampant through the outside world stabbed into her at once.

Once she reached that point, there was nothing to be afraid of.

From human eyeballs to the sensors of machines and from the birds flying in the sky above to the bugs crawling on the earth below, she could accurately trace any and all "gazes" back to their sources.

To put it another way, the Sarasvati was very difficult to pilot and it required an Elite with enough skill to pull that off.

It was obvious if one thought about it, but it had the large-scale cultivation functionality added in on top of the simple strategic weapon functionality. That inevitably added more weight and energy costs.

(…)

The brown Pilot Elite slowly breathed in and released the air little by little.

Her consciousness melted away.

By the time her existence fully vanished, she would once more be reborn as the goddess that brought moisture and blessings to the enemy of the wasteland.

Part 7

When Quenser left the motel, the outdoors felt like a sweaty locker room. A sticky fog covered his hair, which only made the oppressively hot night all the more miserable. The fluorescent and decorative lights had become vague blobs with no real outline, so it felt like being thrown out into a nightmare.

He recalled what Millia Newburg had told him.

“We’ll meet up in the southeastern shopping district. That’s where we in Azul Hive get our funds. They might notice us if we moved as a group, so everyone find your own transportation and take different routes.”

The sound of a bolt unlocking snapped him back to the present.

He saw Heivia forcing open the door to a two-seat sports car parked on the side of the road. He then removed the plastic cover below the steering wheel and started messing with the wires.

“Hop in already, Quenser.”

“You’re kidding. Do you have any idea how old a car would have to be to turn on by touching two wires together?”

“Don’t be stupid. I’m shorting it to reset the immobilizer. See? This is how this city works!”

Quenser heard the roar of a cheap engine and the blinding beams of the headlights.

He clicked his tongue, climbed into the passenger seat, and saw Heivia ripping out the GPS car navigation and chucking it out the window.

“Let’s get going. Time isn’t gonna wait around for us.”

“Wow… You know there’s something wrong with the world when I’m the closest thing to a symbol of benevolence.”

“What are you talking about? Reusing cars is the ecological thing to do. This’ll move the hands of the World Clock back a little.”

“Yeah, but I hope this city’s crazy rules never catch on anywhere else.”

“To be clear, I’m following my own rules here. I check the door and the lock and only steal the cars that have already been stolen. Then I search out the original owner based on the number and secretly take it back to them. I’m kind like a rough towing service. And it’s true I tend to get into car chases and that’ll damage it a fair bit, but it’s still better than nothing.”

With that, the two idiots drove the stolen car off into the foggy city.

Even with the poor visibility, barely any of the other cars were showing any caution. In fact, it looked like most of them were not even obeying the traffic lights. There were also plenty of people on the sidewalks, but unlike during the day, there were far fewer in swimsuits. Instead, there were a lot of women in shiny strips of cloth that may have been cocktail dresses or stripper outfits.

“The old man in that black luxury car we just passed is the city’s most famous **Jeweler**. And I of course mean that he’s willing to launder the precious metals that people have stolen. He’s been getting carried away lately, so people have been betting on when he’ll be attacked by men in masks.”

“…”

“That tow truck is actually a **Car Thief** who steals luxury cars in broad daylight. If you see him, don’t get too close. He’s made a lot of enemies, so you never know when a stray bullet will fly his way.”

“…”

Quenser heard a dry explosive sound and thought he saw something like a life-size doll falling from a building’s balcony, but no one paid much attention.

“Don’t worry. That wasn’t targeted at us. These days, I’ve heard a lot about a mysterious **Sniper** appearing on the building roofs at night.”

Quenser got the feeling he would wear himself out pointing out how ridiculous it all was.

The normal old men and women walking along the street were as likely to be carrying guns as the more conspicuous people. Just

watching it all seemed to wear down his spirit. He was feeling homesick for the battlefield country he had left to come here, but he concluded that meant he was normal.

He then heard Millia Newburg's voice from the radio tossed on top of the dashboard.

"I just received word from the unit in the mountains. The blackout will begin in thirty seconds. Be careful as you approach traffic lights and railway crossings. It would be safest to stop on the curb ahead of time."

A low rumble and a darkness deeper than a movie theater covered all of Lost Angels. Even with the car's headlights, there was some confusion.

Quenser heard sounds of bending metal and breaking glass from all around, but Heivia slipped through it all with only one hand on the wheel.

"It takes an average of fifteen seconds for it to recover. As awful as this city is, it is supported by the military, so don't get greedy and think you can break open a roadside ATM while the security is down."

Just as she had said, the power returned as quickly as it had gone out.

The city's lights recovered and blinded the already confused drivers.

After entering an intersection and nearly getting hit by a large bus, Heivia cheerfully honked the horn several times and turned the corner.

This new road was a straight shot to the wharf.

"What's the Faith Organization military doing?"

"No obvious movements from the Object or the people," replied Millia. "They don't seem to have realized what we're doing."

"So Step 1 was a success."

"This is where it really begins. Hurry on to the port."

Part 8

A group of Faith Organization soldiers known as the Clovers witnessed the blackout too.

They had originally been naval experts, but the reliance on Objects could be glimpsed in the fact that they were simply guarding a harbor. They seemed to have some interest in the distant Island Nation because their name was a pun on that nation's words for white clovers and the white collars they wore.

They were meant to protect the Object construction and maintenance facility at the southernmost point of the city, but the Sarasvati had requested that they all move outside of the Great Fence three kilometers to the north.

Also, the naval Clovers were not the only ones to receive that request.

Everywhere they looked, the cafes and donut shops near the Great Fence were packed full of men and women in lab coats and work uniforms. They had all settled down here until Pilot Elite Putana Highball finished her meditation.

A young white collar who was really only a boy gave the foggy sky an annoyed look.

"What are we even doing?"

"Don't let it get you down, youngster. We wouldn't get any money without the Object."

"I don't know what this 'scopophobia' is about, but I can't believe she had even her personal bodyguards leave."

The too-young white collar glanced over at the Great Fence.

The fog kept him from seeing the details of the Object, but its dark silhouette was more than visible. A lighthouse on a small island provided a backlight for the Sarasvati and the Object's shadow was displayed on the screen created by the fog.

"You can complain if you want, but don't look back at the base. She'll read the emotions in your gaze."

“Seriously?”

“Seriously. The Elites are manmade espers, after all.”

That was of course untrue, but it was the view held by normal soldiers who knew little of Objects.

“Even the full security network of the base can’t hope to match the Object’s sensors. If she’ll do our job for us, that’s fine by me.”

“That may be true, but…”

He trailed off as Lost Angels was suddenly wrapped in pitch darkness. Even the lighthouse went out.

The too-young Clover pulled his visor down over his eyes and started to raise his carbine, but…

“Put down your gun! Panic and you’ll shoot one of us!”

Someone grabbed the gun from the side and pointed it straight up.

“Calm down, youngster. These blackouts happen all the time on hot nights. It’s because of all the air conditioners. This is a part of being ecological. The young wives who are so obsessed with the World Clock will be rejoicing.”

“But…”

“It doesn’t matter. Either way, the Sarasvati has power from its reactor, so its sensors are up and running. Crossing the Great Fence in the dark will only get you vaporized.”

The city was not even wrapped in darkness for a full twenty seconds.

The power soon recovered, beginning with the most important regions. Fortunately for the donut shop, the lights came on just in time to reveal a young man preparing to break the register, so the workers were able to gang up on him.

“A toast to night in Lost Angels,” said the older white collar.

The lighthouse on the small island seemed to have recovered as well because the Sarasvati’s silhouette appeared on the fog once more.

“Let’s call a **Pizza Deliveryman** and get something to eat. I hear they’ll deliver anywhere in the city as long as you give them a GPS signal.”

“Isn’t that one of our researchers being attacked in that donut shop!? We need to help him!!”

Part 9

Once Quenser and Heivia arrived at the wharf, they gathered with plenty of other Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers. They had all stolen cars from here or there, so it looked like a gathering of a small street-racing gang.

The shopping port was a large scale source of funding and criminal infrastructure for the Legitimacy Kingdom’s Azul Hive, so once in there, the Faith Organization and the Information Alliance could not reach them so easily. They could see some guards/snipers on the top of gantry cranes and container piles here and there.

“Step 1 is complete and they haven’t noticed a thing. We’ve ‘removed their gazes’.”

Still wearing a bikini top and baggy cargo pants, Millia Newburg sat on the hood of convertible and encouraged them all.

“Step 2, using Mr. Mayonnaise’s biometrics to hack into the Faith Organization’s system, was also a success. We have a direct line into the Collective Farming through its maintenance port. The cockpit screens will never tell the Elite anything is wrong.”

She raised a finger at a time as she continued.

“But Step 3 is the problem. We don’t have unlimited personnel, so you all need to help. We’ll be splitting into small groups and boarding submersibles. We’ll bypass the Great Fence by using the sea. Do you understand? Then get going.”

They opened a metal container and pulled out a ton of oxygen tanks.

The submersibles were not downsized versions of whale-shaped

submarines. They were forty centimeter wide, two meter long cylinders with a seat and handlebars forcibly attached. The rider would grab on while the cylinder was lying on its side.

“These are human torpedoes, aren’t they?” said Millia.

“Bfh!? Human…what!?”

“Don’t worry, Heivia. These are harmless leisure products. They’re not even based on the Island Nation’s original weapon. They’re from European models made to take two soldiers there *and* back instead of giving them a one-way ticket. You’re apparently supposed to sneak up to a ship, attach the main portion with a magnet, and then detonate it from a safe distance.”

Quenser frowned with an oxygen tank in hand.

“Huh? This says it was made in the Information Alliance.”

“That’s the free market for you. We know someone who’s convenient to use even if they belong to a different world power. That **RC Girl** carries everything in with a drone and monitor glasses.”

Quenser and Heivia put some goggles on, placed the tanks on their backs, put the mouthpieces in, and jumped into the dark ocean. They both climbed up onto a seat and grabbed the handlebars.

“Quenser, why can you use a submersible just fine, but you can’t drive a car or a motorcycle?”

“I used one of these on a field trip back in the safe country. That one was shaped more like a jet ski, though. There are no roads in the ocean and you can’t fall over.”

They travelled along at a depth of about ten meters while moving much faster than a bicycle.

They were heading toward the jagged cape that looked like shark teeth.

After moving well past the cape and approaching the small lighthouse island, they surfaced.

“Amazing. They really haven’t noticed.”

“The simpler the trick, the harder it is to escape once you’ve fallen

for it.”

Heivia pointed up with his thumb from the submersible next to him.

Quenser looked in the same direction and saw that the lighthouse’s light was out.

Up ahead, Millia Newburg gave them a hand signal.

“Let’s finish this quickly.”

There was no more need to stay underwater.

They took a few items from the team that had taken control of the lighthouse and they travelled across the water toward the Faith Organization’s Object construction and maintenance facility dock.

A fifty meter presence was there.

It was the Collective Farming.

It used an air cushion propulsion device and had a low-stability plasma cannon for its main cannon. However, it also had a giant bedrock road roller on the front and a cultivator on the back that looked like a street cleaner’s brush placed on its side and with metal blades attached. That equipment for Re Terra was attached by arms that could move up and down, so it could likely switch between combat mode and cultivation mode.

Even if they had secured their safety in something like a balancing act, a single mistake would mean instant death here. Quenser and the others could not stop the uncomfortable sweat pouring down them.

Heivia spoke up, perhaps wanting to calm himself by focusing on their own side.

“Hey, where’s our Princess at anyway?”

“Out at sea. But I doubt she’ll come to save us if we screw this up. Still, she’s doing well enough to be complaining about the ice cream flavors provided in the cockpit. When I contacted her earlier, she said something about the mint being too strong.”

“Wow. And we’re at war. The worries at the top are on a completely different scale, I see.”

The facility’s cameras and the Object’s sensors would not detect Quenser and the others. Once they arrived below the colossal weapon, they attached metal wires to the backs of their submersibles, soaked the other end in military-grade instant glue, and attached those ends to the air cushion’s float. The lighter of them climbed up the ropes to the Object’s spherical main body. They dropped down large pieces of cloth as if unfurling hanging banners. After binding them together with ropes, they had made

several sails connecting the cannons.

“Pull out your handheld devices,” ordered Millia. “Open the throttle when the screen tells you! This thing weighs two hundred thousand tons, so the wires will snap right away if we try to force it. We only need to ride the waves and prevent it from sliding to the side. We have plenty of time, so take it slow! Nice and slow!!”

“Are you serious? These are one-man submersibles and this thing weighs as much as two old-fashioned nuclear aircraft carriers. Can we really move an entire Object with fifty of these toys?”

Quenser answered Heivia’s annoyed question.

“It’s like pushing a snowball at the top of a hill. We’re borrowing the power of the wind. If we give just a bit of help at the start, the waves will carry it from there. To get it started, we need distributed force. If any one spot sticks out, the wires will all snap starting from there.”

“I know that, but sometimes I just can’t believe the math!”

“Yeah, I can explain why a bowling ball and feather fall at the same speed in a vacuum, but it doesn’t quite click in my head.”

Regardless, the die had been cast.

All they could do was continue on and trust in their success and their victory.

Millia Newburg gave one last comment with a daring smile on her lips.

“Now, let’s pull Excalibur from the stone.”

Part 10

The meditation lasted until four in the morning this time.

Putana Highball slowly opened her eyes.

After concluding she had completed her combination with the

Second Generation Object named Sarasvati, she slowly moved her hands and legs while still bound by her harness like a butterfly trapped in a spider web. The surrounding interface writhed like tentacles as it used its infrared lasers to detect the minute changes in her skin and send signals to the digital controls.

“Hm?”

She then realized a clear discrepancy in the scenery and readings displayed in the giant screen when compared to her artificially enhanced senses acquired through the combination.

Putana chose to believe her own senses which she had honed so thoroughly.

She sent a few commands in quick succession, but something was clearly wrong.

Namely, the Object was slowly turning, but the scenery on the screen remained entirely unchanged. The familiar vision of the Object construction and maintenance facility was a fake that looped every few minutes.

“What…happened!?”

She became painfully aware that everything inside the cockpit was just series of zeroes and ones. She checked through the entire system much more quickly than a mechanical virus scanner could and swiftly found the source of the problem.

“External interference. The source code was illegally overwritten. … Dammit. A cyber attack!?”

She instantly deleted the malicious line and manually typed in the proper source code.

The data network that rivalled the data link of an entire fleet was back up and running.

The view on the large screen changed.

“Eh?”

She saw nothing but ocean in every direction. There was no land to be seen.

She was sitting exposed in the ocean with no protection from the

Faith Organization.

She sensed countless gazes. Dozens of wires were attached to the air cushion float, those wires were attached to small submersibles, and unknown solders were clinging to the Object, performing some unknown work.

And to top it all off, a First Generation Legitimacy Kingdom Object sat outside her main cannon's movable range with the muzzle of its own cannon essentially pressed to the back of her head.

The Baby Magnum sent an open radio transmission to the Sarasvati.

"I will fill you with molten lead."

She did not say where and that seemed to corner Putana Highball all the more.

"More importantly, I am much faster than you from this position. I can hit you three times in the time it takes you to turn around, so surrender. If you do, I can at least guarantee your survival."

What had happened?

The Faith Organization Pilot Elite was so confused that she forgot to even breathe.

However, this was not a bad dream.

No matter how long she waited, she never woke up.

Part 11

Putana was not the only one who was confused.

It happened as soon as dawn arrived.

"Wh-what the hell!?"

The marine experts of the Clovers had been killing time along the Great Fence three kilometers north of the southern cape, but the too-young member let out a hysterical shout.

The rising sun had lessened the effect of the lighthouse and the screen of fog had gradually cleared away, but at the same time, the fifty meter weapon had vanished like an illusion. As they all watched, that massive machine disappeared.

“What is going on? O-oh, I know! We need to contact the Pilot Elite!!”

“We’ve already tried, but we can’t get through!!”

While communicating to a number of places via radio, they crossed the Great Fence and hurried back to their workplace. They got the security system back up and running and performed a thorough scan of the land and the sea, but the cameras and sensors found nothing.

They were looking for a two hundred thousand ton mass.

That was far too large to hide, yet their cutting-edge observation equipment could not find a single trace of it.

“What the hell is going on? Did it really just vanish in the fog?”

“C-could it have had some trouble and sunk into the ocean?”

“The water around the dock is only about ten meters deep. Even if that round thing sank, it would still rise far above the surface. That wasn’t it. But if it wasn’t…then what was?”

At that moment, an operator gave a report of something below the ocean further out to sea.

But it was not the Object.

The data from the ultrasonic scan said it was less than twenty meters, putting it at about the size of a tug boat.

However, it had something attached that a normal tug boat would not have.

At first, they thought it was a crane meant to drag up rocks and sunken ships, but it was not.

“What is this?”

“A metal tower?”

That guess by the older white collar was not entirely wrong.

However, another name came to mind when they saw what was attached to the top.

The photograph taken by an underwater drone showed a giant light that could not even rotate and a special lens that focused the light on a single point.

Altogether…

“A lightship?”

Instead of building a tower on an island or cape, the lighthouse would float in the sea like a buoy.

And if it had sunk there…

“Wait. Does that mean…there were two lighthouses last night?”

The older white collar quickly looked over to the sea.

There was supposed to be a small island out there with nothing but a lighthouse on it.

“Then which of the two lights were we seeing!?”

Part 12

The trick itself was simple.

It was an optical illusion only meant to last one night.

“You know those magic tricks on TV shows where they make a large passenger plane disappear? What they do is slowly turn the platform the audience is sitting on, show them a completely different direction, and make it look like the plane disappeared. My suggestion is something like that.”

During a discussion to kill time, Quenser Barbotage had given his explanation while attaching colorful magnets to a whiteboard.

“Basically, you just need two lighthouses.”

He had moved the magnets.

“On a foggy night, you switch one lighthouse off and the other one on when the power goes down and then back up. That will slightly alter the source of the light. Then the guards looking to the southern cape will think the shadow projected onto the fog is the Object. Even if…”

He had showed off by holding a kids’ meal toy between his thumb and forefinger.

It was a doll(?) of the Baby Magnum sold in the safe countries.

“Even if it’s a toy as small as this. They’re only seeing the silhouette, so they won’t know the exact distance and size.”

He had added arrows to the magnets on the whiteboard.

“As long as we can get them to focus on the decoy silhouette, we can do whatever we want. The original lighthouse will be off, so we can remove the real Object without worrying about a backlight. It won’t show up on the fog screen no matter how much we move it, so no one will stop us. Of course, we can’t have the real silhouette ever showing up, so we would need to keep the lightship’s light from rotating. Instead, we’d need to have the light strengthen and fade so it looks like it’s turning when seen from head on,” he had added. “Then we just have to sneak up to the Object and drag it out to sea. If our Princess threatens the Elite with her main cannon, we might be able to get a Faith Organization Object without a scratch on it.”

That had all been nothing but a theory.

What if it was not foggy on the night in question?

What if the blackout did not work properly?

How were they supposed to fool the Object’s own cameras and sensors?

What if the Elite found she really needed to use the bathroom in the middle of her meditation and what if a delinquent soldier did not feel like leaving the Large Fence and stayed in his barracks?

How exactly were they supposed to drag it out to sea?

If any one of those did not work out, it would all fail, so it was a dangerous tightrope act.

But experts on the scene were the kind of people who found a way to make up for what they lacked.

And a few days after that idle discussion, Major Frolaytia Capistrano had grinned and made a certain announcement.

“Rejoice. It seems the higher ups took a liking to your unique suggestion. You should get orders to head to Lost Angels before long, so make sure you’re packed and ready to go.”

Part 13

“Yayyyy!!”

Quenser and the others cheered while clinking together mugs of cheap soda water.

They were thirty kilometers south of Lost Angels on the deck of a small aircraft carrier of the Legitimacy Kingdom Object Maintenance Fleet floating in the Indian Ocean.

For some reason, a table with a pure white tablecloth was placed in the middle of the deck and it was covered with a simple feast of pizza, fried chicken, and French fries.

The surrounding soldiers who only had soap-like rations to eat were giving them murderous looks, but Quenser, Millia, and the rest of the Lost Angels team were the MVPs of the winning team today.

They had captured a cutting-edge Second Generation Object entirely intact. That alone was a victory worth five billion dollars, but the various technologies they were sure to find when they dismantled it would up that value to immeasurable levels. It was hardly surprising that the extremely satisfied higher ups would demand that the team was rewarded in every way possible.

Incidentally, the feast was especially luxurious because Millia Newburg had confiscated the money Quenser and Heivia had snuck out of the Capitalist Corporations armored van. When it came to

information management, they could not hope to match someone from the intelligence division.

And that meant their only choice was to make the most of this.

Heivia stuck his fingers in his mouth to whistle and then shouted with a piece of fried chicken held up like a microphone.

“Okay, okay! It’s time for an interview with today’s hero! This operation was thought up by Quenser Barbotage, the super genius of our own 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion!! How are you feeling now!?”

“Now, now, now. I only came up with the idea! It was Millia and the others who made it a reality!!”

“C’mon, you can’t let yourself be so hardheaded while on the front lines! And I never imagined the intelligence division would get a turn in the spotlight!!”

“Ah ha ha ha ha!!”

“Wa ha ha ha ha!!”

In a win-win scenario like this, people’s tolerance knew no bounds. Those two idiots would normally fight over any loose change they found on the ground, but here they pretended to be intellectuals and tried to let the other have the honor.

The Princess was also a part of the winning team as she had made the final holdup, so she had joined in even though she always had nice things to eat.

Frolaytia however did not get to eat.

She breathed out some sweet-smelling smoke from her kiseru and wrapped an arm around Quenser’s shoulder like a delinquent.

And she took no notice when the Princess grew a little irritated.

“You did a great job this time, Quenser.”

“Heh…eh heh heh! You really think so!? Y’know, if you’d taken off that formal uniform and exposed that nice body of yours to the sun, you might have been able to join us in this reward!!”

“Well, that might have been a nice change of pace. Drawing lines

on a screen to order an attack can get old. How about you let me join in on your discussions from now on?"

"Dwa ha ha ha!! We can have a nice 'hands-on' discussion right now if you want! It can be just the two of us in your room and on your bed!!"

Millia Newburg then wrapped her arm around Quenser's shoulder from the other side and spoke cheerfully.

And she was oblivious to the Princess growing truly angry.

"Unfortunately, I can't let that happen."

"Eh? Why not? W-wait, is everyone finally realizing what a great catch I am!?"

"Yes, a city full of gangs and mafias has really fallen for you."

Millia's comment flash froze Quenser and Frolaytia sighed.

"I don't like it either. If your theory had proved useless in practice, I could have taken you right back, but after such a tremendous success, I've lost my excuse to take you from the intelligence division."

"Eh? Eh? Wait…"

Millia ignored his complaints.

"The city of bullets and desire is waiting! Take three steps and a car is liable to explode, but don't worry!! Lost Angels is filled with villains, but you're the only one to pull off such a daring heist. You'll probably be given either a bed of money or a gravestone, but if you're lucky, you might just escape the city alive!!"

"Oh, no. I've seen this pattern before! Now that I've used up my beginner's luck, I'm done for!! I don't want to go back! I want to quit while I'm ahead and leave that place forever!!"

"You can't, Quenser. Let's see…ahem! 'Effective immediately, Battlefield Student Quenser Barbotage's temporary assignment to Lost Angels is extended indefinitely until further orders are received. He is to work hard for the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion and the Legitimacy Kingdom as a whole.' Whew, HR sure can be scary."

Frolaytia must have been in a really good mood because she grabbed a piece of shiso leaf from a large plate of food, placed it below her nose to create a handlebar mustache, and did an impression of someone's voice.

But Quenser could hardly laugh.

"Going back to Lost Angels is a really bad idea. The gang the Faith Organization controls is definitely going to be on the lookout for me!! And even as the most dangerous city in the world, it's technically a safe country, so I can't hope for any support from the Baby Magnum!!"

The Princess turned around in a huff in her seat a short distance away.

She apparently did not like that he assumed she would always come rushing in to save him.

"Ah ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

"Wa ha ha ha ha ha ha ha!!"

Meanwhile, his superior officers drowned out his completely legitimate fears with laughter.

Tears had no place at a victory party!

Even if death awaited the very next day, that may have been the rule for anyone in the military.

Chapter 2: Guardian Deity of Talent > > Mountain Battle of Lost Angels

Part 1

Long story short, they were back in the run-down Lost Angels motel.

Drawing a board game on the back of some paper seemed like a good idea at the time, but Quenser and Heivia began arguing over whether the paper die was warped or unfair and they ended up in a light scuffle.

Of course, Lost Angels had enough entertainment to last a lifetime (however short that might be), but…

“Oh, screw this! My stress just keeps building up and I don’t feel like heading out for some fun when there are criminals and spies everywhere.”

“This is still better than a Capitalist Corporations safe country. They have constant shootouts between ‘talent trafficking’ kidnappers and school PMCs.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You don’t know? You can make a lot of money selling genius kids to corporations, so there are organizations that specialize in going after elementary and middle school kids. That’s why their school buses are bulletproof and are escorted by armored trucks armed with machineguns. The kidnappers use attack helicopters to go after them from the air. Makes you wonder how that can be called a ‘safe’ country.”

“And the big companies buy the abducted kids!?”

“With DNA tests, you won’t get a 100% match even with a sample from the same person. And when there’s even a 0.1% margin of error, it’s a job for the corporate lawyers. Even if the parents sue them and bring in pictures and hair samples, the lawyers will twist the truth with their words. They’ll make it so the kid is someone

else who ‘just so happens to look a lot like them’.”

“Wow.”

“Of course, it helps that the big companies that control the judicial system and administration are the ones doing this. You’ve probably heard how the Capitalist Corporations very nearly completed a long-term civilian space travel project, but there’s talk that those kids were a part of it. Naturally, just like with the moon landing way back when, there are conspiracy theories that it was all a fake to frighten the other world powers. At any rate, the number of geniuses on their payroll is directly related to the technological power of a corporation, so that market isn’t going away anytime soon. It sure is scary to think about.”

That was when the door cracked open and Millia Newburg of the intelligence division entered with a smile.

“Hi there, everyone. I have a new member to introduce! C’mon in, transfer student!!”

“What? Did some idiot get drunk, pull off an officer’s toupee, and get demoted or something?” asked Heivia while removing his hand from his awful friend’s collar.

But Millia shook her head.

“In a way, this is even more interesting. Heh heh. C’mon already! We’re going to be roommates, so don’t be so shy!!”

She tugged on an arm and pulled someone into the dimly-lit motel room.

“…Wait,” said Quenser in a scratchy voice.

It was a brown-skinned girl with her long black hair tied back. From neck to toes, she was covered in a special skintight fabric. That green outfit with a nurse-like silhouette was most likely the same kind of Pilot Elite special suit that the Princess normally wore.

Green was the color the Faith Organization liked to use and Quenser only knew of one Elite who had recently been forced to leave the Object that was like a part of her own body.

“Tah dah!! It’s Putana Highball who piloted the Collective Farming! After we released her, she was placed against the wall and about to

be shot for her failure, so I attacked and collected her because it sounded like fun!!"

"I-I'll kill you!! I'll slaughter every last one of you who took the Sarasvati, the Faith Organization, and everything from me!! Kiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!!!!!"

When he saw the disgrace of a former Elite starting to struggle and being restrained, Quenser Barbotage grew somewhat blue.

If something happened, he would of course be the first she killed.

"But she's cute, so who cares!!"

"You're pretty sinful yourself, you know that, Quenser?"

Part 2

However…

"Our job today is in the northern mountains. You each need to secure your own transportation and hurry there. Oh, and Quenser! Putana may be from the city, but I doubt she's left the Faith Organization base much. Show her around Lost Angels while also teaching her our way of doing things. Teaching the newbies is a job for the old newbie. Heivia did the same for you, remember? Have fun☆"

" 'Teacher', if you're going to show me the way around Lost Angels, I'd like you to show me a lot more 'shortcuts' and 'back streets'!!"

"Noooooo!! I'd always wanted a girl to invite me into an empty back alley, but not like thiiiissssssssssssss!!"

In a supermarket parking lot near the run-down motel, Quenser screamed like a girl stopped by an old man wearing nothing but a trench coat.

The city of Lost Angels was as insane as ever. A nearby store was blown up, black smoke rose into the blue sky, and a **Pizza**

Deliveryman ignored it while riding his scooter down the road.

“By the way, teacher, I have a question.”

“Wh-what is it?”

“Who was it that thought up the plan to steal my Sarasvati? From what I’ve overhead, it was an idea suggested by a normal soldier.”

“Ha…ha ha ha ha ha!! I-I have no idea what you’re talking about. That was a plan to steal a Second Generation Object, right? To think up that, you’d have to be a sexy genius from some new breed of human!!”

“Mhh… Come to think of it, you’re right. A normal person like you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

Anyway, they were not out here to pick up some food.

A clattering sound made it clear Quenser was in the process of stealing a light off-road motorcycle.

“If I connect this…to this… Wow, Heivia was right! It actually started up! I can’t believe it. How cheap is this thing!?”

“No matter how complicated they make it, it’ll still get stolen, so I doubt anyone tries that hard. That motorcycle was probably stolen from another parking lot.

Starting up the engine was one thing, but Quenser could not drive a motorcycle.

After seeing a macho man quickly running over from a store with a handgun at the ready, Putana Highball hopped onto the seat and Quenser clung to her back. She must have made a mistake operating the clutch because the off-road two-wheel vehicle hopped up in a flashy wheelie.

This was a common sight in Lost Angels.

Dry gunshots rang out behind them.

“I see,” said Putana. “So this is why they call it the city of corruption.”

“Eh? What was that!? I can’t hear you over the wind!”

“Lost Angels is a part of the Faith Organization, but it doesn’t look like it, does it? Rumor has it it was a giant experiment to see what happened to people after they lost their faith. …And it’s making my skin crawl, so don’t cling to me like that, teacher.”

“Buhahhh.”

“Why are you sniffing at me so obviously right after I warned you!?”

“Nothing you say will change the fact that I’m in a good position here. So no matter how much you’ll hit me later, I’m gonna do it! Oh, your body is so soft and warm. Girls are the best!!”

That was when Millia Newburg’s familiar voice came in over the radio.

“Hey, there! Looks like you’re going at it already, so I’m glad to see you’re making progress with her training.”

With a deep roar of an engine, a motorcycle pulled up alongside theirs. Millia was driving, Heivia sat behind her with his arms around her waist, and neither of them was wearing a helmet. They had clearly had a rough ride because Quenser’s horrible friend was completely pale and did not seem able to enjoy the warmth of his beautiful commanding officer. He was clinging to her for dear life.

To prevent the wind from drowning her out, Millia was speaking through the radio despite how close they were.

“This is a good opportunity. How about we have a race to our destination in the northern mountains? We both have a guy loaded on the back, so the conditions seem fair to me. Think of it like a welcome party to get to know each other.”

“Your bike is the large kind used in professional races. I can’t hope to match those specs.”

“Finding the best ride is part of the challenge here in Lost Angels. Or are you afraid that a great Elite is going to lose to a normal soldier in a vehicle race because of a slight handicap like that?”

“……

“Oh, no!” shouted Quenser. “I think this Elite had too sheltered an upbringing to know when someone’s provoking her!”

The two motorcycles stopped side by side in front of a lowered railroad crossing barrier.

As a rusty freight train slowly passed by, Millia gave a simple explanation of the rules.

“The goal is our original destination and you can choose whatever route you like. The witnesses can be the luggage we have sitting behind us. Any other local rules necessary?”

“Only that we ban gunfire and running each other off the road.”

“Hah hah! Sounds like you’ve figured out how this city works!”

The final car of the freight train passed by, a bell sounded like the clattering of an empty can, and the barrier lifted.

Intense acceleration immediately pressed in on Quenser and Heivia's guts.

The scenery flew by and a blast of wind struck their entire bodies. The two motorcycles passed some cars waiting at a light, did not hesitate to drive right out into the traffic flowing like a river through the intersection, took a sharp curve, and started down the

major road. Once again, the world was wasting all sorts of energy and the hands of the World Clock were moving ever faster.

“Abah. Abababababababah!?”

“Teacher, not so loud.”

Despite Putana’s casual tone, Quenser did not have it in him. If not for his overflowing passion for enjoying this girl’s body temperature for as long as possible, he would almost certainly have been thrown off already.

At first, Putana fell behind due to her inferior engine. She kept her position about ten meters behind Millia Newburg and used her superior off-road ability to switch between lanes and take the shortest route, even if by only a meter or ten centimeters. The way she took the inside of every turn to the point of just about hitting things was taking years from the lifespan of Quenser’s heart, so the World Clock was now the least of his worries.

An old man who had apparently been stripped of everything he owned was sitting in a daze on the roadside. He only wore underwear and the luxury car next to him had all of its bulletproof glass broken. Quenser was pretty sure he was the **Jeweler** famous for laundering, but from now on, he would have his hands full finding a cardboard box to sleep in.

Millia’s voice arrived over the radio again.

“How about we kill some time by reviewing the mission?”

“…!!”

Suggesting that in her spare time seemed to have stoked Putana’s competitive spirit.

The brown girl violently twisted the throttle lever and Quenser’s scream rose in pitch.

Up ahead, Millia moved into the opposing traffic to get around a slow-moving truck and she spoke calmly with cars zooming by on either side.

“Our job today is to support the 37th Mobile Maintenance Battalion. Specifically, we’re going to be supporting their Object, the Baby Magnum.”

“The Princess’s?”

“The northern mountains are considered a part of Lost Angels, but the other side of the mountains doesn’t fall into the safe country category. A battlefield country juts sharply in there and there’s someone there just asking for a nice heavy punch.”

While ignoring three lights in a row, Putana continued pursuit, but she was not closing in any.

More than just the difference in engine specs, Millia was a skilled driver.

“Our opponent is a Second Generation Faith Organization Object named the Flyaway.”

“Because it’s frivolous?”

“The name does have a meaning, but not in a good way. That’s why they want the Princess to blow it to smithereens.”

Putana’s control of the handlebars grew a little stiff when she heard the Faith Organization mentioned.

The distance between them opened up, even if by only a few meters.

Millia Newburg passed by a few cars as if shaking her butt in Putana’s direction.

“The simplest way to explain its fighting style is ‘always flee’. As soon as things get dangerous, it releases its main cannon and uses the reduction in weight to escape the battlefield.”

“Its main cannon? But isn’t that full of military secrets?”

“That’s why the main cannon is like a beehive made of large containers. It’s got a ton of large-capacity batteries and bug legs, so it can run around on its own for a bit even after being abandoned. It can’t fire without the reactor, but it can regroup with the Object or be picked up after escaping the battlefield. And if you try to stop it by firing on it, it’ll melt like candy. Either way, you lose your chance to get those secrets.”

“Another pain in the ass…”

“Agreed. The information we’ve gathered says it uses its beehive-

like coilgun to scatter eighty percent of its ammunition in the first five seconds, abandons that main cannon, and uses it as a diversion to escape. And if it's about to be caught, it won't hesitate to send out the White Flag signal. …It uses that combination of surprise attack and retreat for months at a time while waiting for its enemy to be worn down."

In an age where clashes between nuke-resistant Objects had become daily topics of conversation, the six or seven billion people on earth had not gone extinct due to a few ridiculous implicit understandings about the battlefield. The White Flag signal was one of those. If one of the Objects was destroyed or unable to continue fighting, that signal would be sent out to avoid a slaughter of the people in the undefended maintenance base.

However…

"The White Flag is supposed to be for emergencies, so if they keep using it like that…"

"Yes. They'll create a situation where people are so fed up with it that they ignore it. This one idiot could easily ruin one of the rules of the battlefield. That's why we have to settle this before it happens."

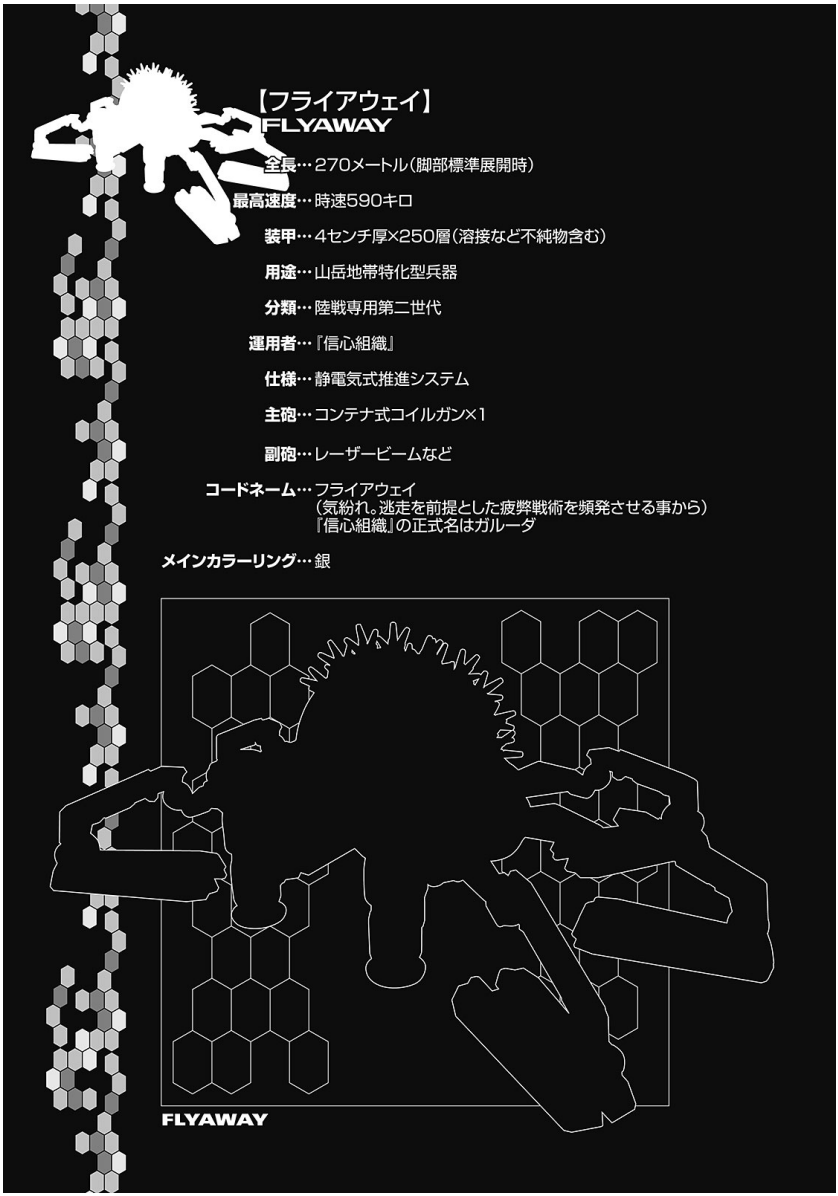
There were a few different ways to do that.

1. Destroy it with a single attack before it could use the White Flag.

2. Obstruct its propulsion device so it could not escape after abandoning its main cannon.

3. Somehow prevent it from transmitting the White Flag.

Of course, if they could pull off #1 with no real preparation, this enemy would not have been a problem in the first place.



“The battlefield is in the treacherous mountains I mentioned before and that’s where the Flyaway works best. It uses its eight legs with a static electricity propulsion device, so it almost seems to slide up slopes as steep as sixty-five degrees. If it wanted to, it could slip back and forth between this side and that side of the mountains.”

The Princess used a multi-role First Generation Object, so it was designed to work just as well in a desert or the Antarctic Ocean. However, that meant it did not specialize in any one environment, so she would be slower than the Flyaway on a mountain slope.

“To put it another way, would the Princess be able to take it out if its legs were dealt with?”

“I’m glad you catch on so quickly. No matter how special its design is, the Flyaway still uses static electricity to float. If we do something to the ground below its feet, we can still interfere with its movement.”

Lost Angels was a city of two million, but as they traveled north, the buildings gradually grew shorter and a wasteland covered in fine, orange sand grew more obvious. Looking down the path of tall metal towers carrying high-voltage lines brought a wall of treacherous mountains into view.

Those were the northern mountains.

The tallest of them was not even two thousand meters and there was no hint of snow.

Instead, a hydroelectric power station and a ropeway were visible on the slope even from the distance.

“We don’t need any mountain climbing equipment. There’s an observatory on the peak, so you can get up by winding road or by cable car. We can easily take our bikes up to the top, so don’t worry.”

“A winding road? So a series of hairpin curves? …That means I still have a chance!!”

Millia likely understood that as well, but she still needlessly opened up the throttle and produced an explosive backfire to provoke the new girl.

But all of a sudden, the mountains up ahead shook.

A great cloud of dust blew down from the mountains and there was nothing the puny humans could do even though they saw the wall approaching.

Their vision narrowed considerably like they were caught in a sandstorm, the bright sunlight itself was cut off, and the area grew as dark as dusk.

A stinging pain ran across their cheeks. They had no helmet visor or goggles to protect them, but they continued the race. After

switching on the headlights, Putana opened the throttle despite the limited visibility.

“Ugh. Peh, peh!! What just happened!?”

“Damn, that was sooner than predicted. This must be what they call an unexpected turn of events. It looks like the Princess has run into the Flyaway!!”

Part 3

“…”

The Princess took shallow breaths inside the Baby Magnum’s cockpit.

Beads of sweat trailed down her relatively unexpressive face.

The alarms sounded quite distant.

She could hear someone’s voice in her ear, but it took her a while to comprehend the words.

“Prin…cess… Save your confusion for when you return safe and sound! It’s too soon to sit there in a daze!!”

The transmission from Frolaytia acted like a slap to the face and the Princess somehow managed to grab one of the countless levers again.

Her eyeballs and their pupils gave targeting instructions to the machinery.

Her target was the Second Generation Faith Organization Object named the Flyaway.

It looked like a massive eight-legged insect clinging to the steep slope.

Its main cannon was made up of moving containers, so it could be abandoned like a lizard’s tail.

But it was not exposure to that threat which had made the

Princess's heart race.

She felt no real danger from an Object that would have its main cannon crawl around as a diversion and escape after the first attack.

She heard a crumbling sound as the mountain slope broke away below her.

But there was something strange mixed in that was not earthen dust or broken rock. She also saw a curved metal rail and a few pieces of metal that looked like they had burst from within. Before they had been destroyed so spectacularly, they may have been advertised as follows in a Lost Angels pamphlet with some photographs to go along with it:

Take a ride through the miraculous night scenery of Lost Angels.

How about a midair stroll in the world's fastest cable cars?

"…Ugh."

The Princess clenched her teeth and groaned as she used her gaze to aim.

But before her seven main cannons could roar, the Flyaway crossed the mountain ridge and escaped to the other side of the mountain.

That other side was Lost Angels, a Faith Organization safe country.

Starting from the route it took, the Flyaway had repeatedly violated the rules of war, so it had apparently not cared too much when it fired either.

"Uph!!"

The Princess brought a hand to her mouth and just barely held back the urge to vomit.

No matter how many powerful Objects she had destroyed or gun-wielding soldiers she had killed, that was completely different from killing innocent civilians. This slaughter that left the bounds of what could be called "war" caused her consciousness to flash in and out.

Her eyes turned toward one corner of the large screen.

More than ten seconds had passed since the "accidental shellfire",

but the wreckage of the cable cars continued to fall from the cliff like it was rolling down a hill.

The Princess did not know how many dozens or hundreds of people had been onboard, but that movement made it all too clear that no miracle would allow them to return alive.

Part 4

"This is F-F-F-Flashtime News (à la a DJ's scratch)!! Today's headline: Legitimacy Kingdom vs. Faith Organization, Mistake in the Mountains? There's been a great tragedy involving all eighty-nine cable car passengers. Not much investigation has been done since the place is still a battlefield, but the odds of survival are looking grim. And it seems the victims were mostly children here on a trip. Both sides' PR offices are giving conflicting explanations, so there's a fear the truth may never be known."

With their mission put on hold, Quenser and the others had returned to the run-down motel.

Quenser gave an annoyed sigh as he watched the news playing on the old TV in one corner of the room.

"If they investigated the scene, it'd be obvious it was the Flyaway's coilgun that did it."

"This guy isn't a representative of public opinion around the world. There was an **Ice Cream Truck** driving by outside, remember? This is a pirate broadcast sent out by that thing, so no one believes it. When he was pissed at the outcome of a race he'd bet on, there was an entire day where every channel was nothing but the asshole of a 'beautiful' bulldog. On that day, trying to watch some TV while eating was a mistake."

"No one here is remotely ecological."

"You mean that World Clock thing? If they put out a report saying the energy used by safe country wives in the living room had grown to ten times that used by the military in battlefield countries, do you think those virtuous civilians would believe it?"

There was no tension in Millia Newburg's voice.

Heivia spoke up while sipping on some bland instant coffee that tasted like a chain store's coffee diluted with muddy water.

"Regardless, we can't ignore this forever, Quenser. The White Flag was bad enough, but now the bastard piloting the Flyaway has completely forgotten his table manners. If we leave now, the same thing will keep happening around the world."

"Those mountains are his home turf, so he's bound to get carried away. If we poke at him, he'll respond, so it won't be hard to get a rematch." Quenser held a hand to his chin as he spoke. "The Princess will deliver the finishing blow, but the problem is how to mess with the Flyaway's footing. Also, he can slide along those treacherous slopes with his eight legs, so how can humans like us catch up to or cut him off. If we can't stop him, not even the Princess can get a shot in."

That was when a girl raised her hand.

It was Putana Highball who had remained perfectly silent all this time.

"I have an idea about that."

"Let's hear it."

Given Millia's approval, the Pilot Elite continued.

"I've heard of secret tunnels filling those mountains. Lost Angels is a safe country and the other side of the mountains is a battlefield country, so those tunnels allow people to lose any pursuit when they're transporting weapons, drugs, dirty money, jewels, or anything else."

"So there's a network of hand-dug smuggling tunnels? That sounds like something Mustard Cowboy – that is, the Capitalist Corporations – would do."

"The Legitimacy Kingdom doesn't have any tunnels?"

"Azul Hive is based in the southeastern commerce port and we get our funding from there. We can bring in as many weapons and people as we want, so there was no need to make any tunnels," explained Millia. "Now, let's get back on topic. The tunnels through

those northern mountains are probably based on the drug tunnels connecting the Capitalist Corporations' main country to Central America. I didn't want to get involved with something so complicated, but I guess we have no choice."

While making those preliminary calculations, she weighed the risks against the benefits and found the benefits won out.

"It's only a rumor, but those mountains are supposed to be as full of tunnels as an ant colony. They may be hand-dug, but I hear they're big enough for a small motorcycle to drive through without issue. But if this is true, it's one of the cornerstones of their business. They'll have made it so we can't easily grasp its full scope. In other words, it would take too long to enter the mountain with surveying equipment now."

"Then what do we do?" asked Heivia with a frown.

Their bikini commander answered immediately.

"Let's do this Lost Angels style. We'll abduct a Mustard Cowboy leader and get the information we need that way. They'll actually be a soldier eating on the taxpayer's dime, so there's no need to hold back. Plus, I happen to know the perfect target."

She operated one of the military computers filling the walls and displayed what looked like a resume with an attached photo. But to be clear, this file had not been written by the man in the photo. It came from a list of dangerous people created using information gathered by the intelligence division.

"George Coral. Male. Age thirty-six. Five registered homes in this city alone. He's a former leader of Mustard Cowboy who had made a name for himself in Lost Angels's western financial district."

"Former?" asked Quenser.

"He was purged after that incident with the stolen lightship focusing lens." Millia sounded amused. "Technically, he's still running around the city. He's only a poor little lamb who had everything taken from him, but that doesn't change the fact that he has Mustard Cowboy's information. Attacking a current leader would mean starting a citywide war, so this should be far easier. It's the perfect chance to get our hands on an accurate map of the smuggling tunnels."

“That settles it then. If we sit around, he’ll be killed by Capitalist Corporations soldiers. You can’t get a dead man to talk, so it would be best to nab him ASAP.”

No one opposed Heivia’s opinion and several sets of footsteps moved toward the run-down motel’s exit.

Quenser looked over at Putana.

“What is it, teacher?”

“Well… Whoever’s piloting the Flyaway is a Faith Organization Elite just like you. I thought maybe you could give us a hint there.”

Putana looked like she was spitting on the ground as she answered.

“They’re a disgrace to the Faith Organization.”

Part 5

There were piles of trash even among the countless high-rise buildings of western Lost Angels. For example, there was a garbage dump at one corner of an intersection. A bearded man lay face up, practically buried in the piles of black garbage bags that were probably no longer used anywhere else in the world.

His former dreadful and impressive aura was gone. An **RC Girl** may have been flying a toy around because she held a remote control while looking up into the blue sky, but not even she paid the man any heed.

The man’s former subordinate gave an exasperated comment.

“You are still in the western area?”

“Shut up… This is my territory, my turf, my domain. Dammit, who’s swimming in that rooftop pool now? Is it Kenny? Or maybe Rob? I’ll find whoever it was that stole my stuff and fill them with holes.”

It may have been this unpredictability that had allowed him to live this long. He had been the boss, so they never would have thought

to find him buried in a pile of trash.

That was all it was.

Once they corrected their image of him, he would likely be found by the Mustard Cowboy soldiers before the long hand of the clock made a full circle, receive a bullet between the eyes before it made a second circle, and be thrown out into the ocean before it made a third.

“It would be best if you left the city and quickly,” said his former friendly subordinate.

“Are you mocking me? Listen. I’m putting together a plan for a comeback. I’m not gonna die here. Why? Because it isn’t my time to die yet, goddammit! First, I’ll get my hands on a gun. I can just punch someone around here and take one!!”

“What do you hope to accomplish with a 9mm bullet?”

“If you want to know, then come with me. I’ll show you the kind of luxury you’ll never find in the tax-funded lifestyle of a soldier. C’mon!! If you’re looking for George Coral, he’s right over herrrrre!! If you’ve got a problem with that, then come face meeeeee!!!!!!”

As soon as the man stood on the top of the trash heap and gave a roar, something happened.

“Will do.”

With that casual comment, Heivia crashed a stolen four-wheel drive vehicle into the trash heap by the intersection.

He did so at full speed and without touching the brakes.

With a great crash, the piled-up black trash bags were knocked every which way like bowling pins.

George Coral, the kingpin at the top, flew through the air and slammed heavily into the vehicle’s roof. The group of **School Trip Students** crossing a nearby crosswalk in a line of boys and a line of girls all widened their eyes in surprise.

Heivia was filled with excitement.

“Ha ha! That tech-illiterate digital exhibitionist’s smartphone was a lot of help. I never thought we’d find the idiot this quickly!!”

A **College Girl in a Monokini** intentionally tripped in feigned surprise and made sure the friction with the ground slide her swimsuit down, but unfortunately, Heivia did not have time to go along with her exhibitionism. After reminding himself he could use the internet to see her changing any time he wanted, he focused on the task at hand.

After all, the man who had fallen on the roof managed to jump down as if rolling off the back of the vehicle and he had started making a run for it as soon as he landed on the asphalt.

He was getting away.

“What the hell!? The guy’s still alive and kicking!!”

“You hit the pile of trash, not him! Backup, backup! Run into him and break his hip. As long as you don’t kill him, we can still get him to talk!!”

Obeying Millia Newburg’s fairly cruel instructions, Heivia threw the vehicle into reverse with the tires screeching against the asphalt.

The shocked bearded man frantically changed direction and climbed onto the scaffolding of a building under construction.

Despite the sound of bending metal and of a heavy impact, the four-wheel drive vehicle missed its target.

George Coral was running up the scaffolding. He was well-built despite being a former leader.

“Oh, honestly! We can’t do anything in this thing!”

“We have to chase after him like monkeys? What a pain in the ass!!”

“No, we can leave this ‘aerial battle’ to the newbie. We’ll grab another vehicle and pursue on the surface. Whether it’s providing support or cutting off his escape, there has to be more we can do.”

As Millia instructed Heivia, she brought the radio to her mouth.

“You heard me, Putana! Chase him down in that off-road motorcycle you like so much!!”

As soon as she spoke, the roar of an engine passed over the four-wheel drive vehicle.

It did not pass “by” it.

The off-road motorcycle used the upward sloping road to make the kind of large jump seen at a circus, passed over the four-wheel drive vehicle’s roof, and landed on the scaffolding.

“Wow. I guess she is a Pilot Elite after all.”

“But why is Quenser clinging to her back?”

“He volunteered to keep an eye on her. He’d be too scared otherwise. He’s the one she would want revenge against, so I bet he doesn’t want to let her out of his sight to prevent any surprise attacks.”

The construction scaffolding was narrow.

The building’s wall and the pillars of metal pipes shot by at tremendous speed only fifty centimeters to either side. They easily drove up the long, narrow metal panels placed diagonally instead of stairs.

“Oh, god! Oh, god! Oh, god! Oh, god!”

“Teacher, why are you even on my bike?”

They were three stories up.

George Coral had relaxed once he had escaped the vehicle, but he stiffened in shock when he turned toward the engine noise behind him.

Putana Highball showed no mercy.

She safely drove through and blew away the professional soldier who had become a gang leader.

The bearded man’s arms and legs flailed wildly, but doubt and fear filled him as the shock of landing never came.

His muscular body had flown over the scaffolding and into empty air. He had broken through the net meant to keep people from falling, slowed down because of it, and finally fell to the ground below.

After confirming that, Putana opened the throttle of her off-road motorcycle and unhesitatingly jumped down from the building's scaffolding.

A three-story freefall began.

As Quenser flew through the air, he felt a chill on his spine when he saw a **Worker** clinging to a telephone pole at eye level. That had reminded him just how high up they were.

The pressure in his stomach from the fall was different from that of simple acceleration, so the student let out a scream.

Putana pressed the back wheel down as she accurately landed the motorcycle right next to George Coral's head where he had fallen ahead of them and did not get back up. She forcefully swerved around to turn the light motorcycle's front wheel toward the bearded man's head. With fine control of the brakes, she stopped at the last second as if lightly biting his head between the tire and the ground.

At this point, it was no different from pressing the muzzle of a gun against his forehead.

"Do as I say," calmly instructed the girl. "Otherwise, I will splatter your brains on the ground here."

"…"

Tears filled George Coral's eyes and he heard two short horn blasts.

A station wagon stopped nearby.

He heard several doors open and close and then a woman in a bikini top and baggy cargo pants walked up with a smile on her face.

"There technically are Faith Organization police in this city, so hurry and load him up. …Now, then. How long a day this will be is entirely dependent on how patient you are, Mr. George Coral."

"Uhh… You pieces of shit…"

The bearded man breathed out, his limbs went limp, and his eyes squeezed shut.

It seemed his return to stardom in Lost Angels was still a long way

off.

Part 6

Quenser, Heivia, Putana, and Millia reported on their progress while taking the station wagon randomly down the large Grape Street.

“This is the microchip hidden in his necktie pin. He was also quick to talk since he feels no obligations to a group that threw him out. Thanks to that, we didn’t have to put on a raincoat and go stand in the bathroom with a knife in hand.”

Their information source, George Coral, was no longer in the station wagon, but not because they had fired a bullet into his head and chucked him from the speeding vehicle.

“What did he ask for in return?”

“An instant fake ID and a Capitalist Corporations brand handgun. I’m sure he’ll be found out within three days, but he probably plans to do something by then. And it’s hardly a problem for us if some infighting breaks out within Mustard Cowboy.”

Abandoning one’s morals brought a lot of possibility.

That was the best part about Lost Angels.

At any rate, they now had an accurate map of the smuggling tunnels through the northern mountains.

If they could take a shortcut through those mountains, even they could cut in front of the Flyaway’s path as it slid along the slopes.

They could strike back against that insane Second Generation that had blown away so many civilians.

Quenser spoke up while fiddling with his radio.

“Hi, Frolaytia? Our preparations are complete. How’s the Princess?”

“A little longer and I would have mixed a sedative into her tea.

She's about ready to give into her anger and start Armageddon. In other words, her head is boiling over. She'll rush in the instant I remove the leash, but I have no intention of sending her in without a plan. Do you have an actual idea as to how you'll trip that thing up?"

"Let's meet and talk sometime."

"What? Have you been so dyed by the intelligence division's ways that you're worried about someone intercepting the signal?"

"(No, that isn't it.)"

"(Why are you whispering?)"

"(How should I put this? Um… There's this girl real nearby who wants revenge on the level of a murdered parent, so I'm a little afraid of revealing any clever ideas around her.)"

"(In a way, you really are living the life of an intelligence operative, Quenser.)"

He gave a nervous look to the side received a puzzled look from the girl in a green special suit modelled after a nurse uniform.

Part 7

Even Lost Angels had the karaoke boxes that had originated in the Island Nation.

Of course, since they were essentially soundproofed, private rooms that could be rented by the hour, they were mostly used by the customers of the women who stood on the street corners in dresses that did not cover much of anything.

And that was why Frolaytia was in an extremely bad mood after meeting up there.

"Quenser… I don't see an ashtray, so could you hold out your hands? Yes, like you're scooping up water."

"If you're stressed out, why not sing a song!? This is a karaoke box,

after all!!”

“Why did you bring me to this love hotel?”

“If a fancy officer showed up at the run-down motel, we’d be advertising that it’s an intelligence division hideout. The place would be blown away by a rocket or bomb the next day.”

Incidentally, Legitimacy Kingdom bodyguards had rented the two neighboring rooms while disguised as customers and a bulletproof SUV was casually waiting in the alley closest to the emergency exit. The defenses put in place for an officer were on an entirely different level.

Frolaytia grabbed a pitcher, poured a carbonated drink into a glass, and grabbed some fried chicken from a large plate of greasy foods.

“What are you planning to do here in Lost Angels?”

“As I said, we got an accurate map of the smuggling tunnels the Capitalist Corporations use. If we use them, we can sneak up on the Flyaway.”

After asking permission, Quenser reached for the same large plate as his commander and munched on some fries.

The onion rings must not have been very good because neither of them took any.

“He uses a static electricity propulsion device just like the Princess, so it’s possible we can stop him from moving using a weakness there.”

“Specifically?”

Frolaytia must not have liked how salty the fried chicken was because she dipped it in a small plate of mayonnaise.

If they used a giant charged sheet commonly known as a Floor Heater, they could pump in a whole bunch of power to mess with the static electricity letting the Object float.

However…

“We can’t rely on a large system like the Floor Heater. The tunnels were hand-dug and only a light off-road motorcycle can get through. They were made to let unregistered guns and drugs

through, so we can't hope for much."

After Quenser shoved several fries into his mouth, Frolaytia took a sip of her carbonated drink and then spoke to the boy.

"Then what will you do? The battlefield covers the entire mountain range, so it's a large area. Also, I'm sure he'll be worried about his own footing. Is there really a way to trip him up without getting caught by his many sensors?"

"It's only a theory, but yes," said Quenser.

Frolaytia grinned and urged him to continue.

"Let's hear it."

"There's something that can mess with his static electricity while also affecting a wide area. All we have to do is transport it through the tunnels and onto the mountain slope."

"But what exactly is it? You already told me you can't use the Floor Heater."

"The tunnels are narrow, but if we aren't transporting a 'solid', we can send quite a lot through at once."

"You don't mean…"

Frolaytia was surprised and Quenser placed a handheld device on the table.

It displayed a satellite photo of the mountains.

The slope was covered by several metal pipes that looked like water slides enlarged several dozen times over.

"There's a hydroelectric power station…in other words, a dam. We just have to use a large pump to draw out the water and send it through the ant colony of smuggling tunnels. Static electricity propulsion devices can't directly cross rivers or oceans, so they have to attach naval floats first. As the Flyaway gets carried away, we'll create a fountain of water at his feet and turn the entire slope into a giant waterfall. That'll stop him."

"And if the Princess keeps enough distance to not get caught too, she just has to fire one of her main cannons…"

“That will be an issue of speed. After the first attack, the Flyaway will remove its main cannon to lighten itself. That means the Princess won’t have to think about evading anymore. If she can blast him before he realizes what’s going on and sends out the White Flag signal, we’ll win.”

It was nothing but a theory.

If the Princess and the intelligence division creating the waterfall could not work together, it would all go up in smoke, so it was a risky gamble.

However, a definite chance for success was beginning to form.

They would be able to strike back against the bastard who had sacrificed so many civilians.

“I leave the decision up to you.”

“Of course you do. I’m the maintenance base commander.”

Naturally, if the report was submitted under the name Quenser Barbotage, a battlefield student and therefore an amateur, the higher ups would not take it seriously. The Collective Farming incident had been a special case.

However, things would be different if it had the name of Major Frolaytia Capistrano.

“I hope you will ‘consider’ it.”

“Understood. I’ll give it some ‘thought’.”

Part 8

They began to move late at night.

Partway along the winding road up the northern mountains was a space that functioned as a rest area and a shop. It was a lot like a highway service area and it was likely supported by the people working at the dam and observatory.

Lost Angels's nights were supposed to be covered in thick fog, but the mountains seemed to be an exception. The fog was probably a product of the cold mountain wind blowing down into the lukewarm ocean, but that humid sea breeze was absent here.

Millia Newburg was speaking with someone over the radio while sitting on the hood of a classic car (that she had of course stolen).

Perhaps to keep them awake, the car's stereo was playing a pirate broadcast at high volume.

"This is F-F-F-Flashtime News (à la a DJ's scratch)!! Lip Service, the attorney's office well-known even within the Capitalist Corporations, is gathering attention by opening an online consultation service. The office specializes in family troubles, so they're a must-have for fixing any trouble with future geniuses being sold to big companies AKA talent trafficking."

She spoke to Quenser and Heivia who were filling their stomachs with the cold steamed chicken and salad pasta left in the cheap store.

"The team we sent ahead has taken control of the hydroelectric power station. We're about to prepare the large pump. The travel team needs to switch over to the off-road motorcycle."

"What's the Princess doing?"

"She's on standby. After getting carried away and starting the battle before we were ready last time, she's being a lot more cautious."

With that, all of the Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers got moving.

They searched through the parking lot that had a number of cars and motorcycles parked in it even late at night.

"Putana, won't you make yourself sick if you eat curry this late?"

"Teacher, I don't understand how you can call something food if it doesn't have more than eight kinds of spices mixed together."

"I'm just thankful I can eat something other than rubber-like rations even though we're at war. Hey, Quenser, whose ass will you be riding this time?"

"If I'm going to be clinging to someone's waist, you should know I'll

choose the girl."

"Teacher, that isn't something to look so proud of. And please just get a license."

While they complained, they stole motorcycles with practiced motions.

Having your means of transportation taken from you in the mountains late at night was a frightening thought, but the damage near the keyhole suggested these had been stolen already. That meant their "owners" had brought this bad luck upon themselves.

"I hate these hot nights and their lack of women. Maybe I should call out to one of those women on the street corners."

"I wouldn't if I were you. Spread your noble blood around like that and you'll have someone killing you in your sleep decades down the line. It'll be like a scene out of Whatever-It's-Called Suspense Theatre."

"My brain knows that, but…y'know, people sometimes have to follow their hearts. Like when I see that beauty in a dress over there with the horny-looking expression."

"That's a trap. You can tell from the location of the pelvis."

Heivia did a spit-take, but Quenser ignored his intensely regretful friend and gave the **Woman in a Dress** a skeptical look. What was he(?) doing on this mountain road?

Before he could find an answer, Millia spoke up.

"Those of us on the transport team will go in the trucks. We have to carry the large pump and other equipment in ahead of time, after all."

"Understood. Putana, keep some distance from the trucks. We don't want to look like we're traveling together."

"Let's have a few of the motorcycles go on ahead. It can't hurt to make sure there isn't an ambush waiting for us."

With that decided, two of the motorcycles took the lead.

Quenser's group watched as the trucks left.

Finally, with a roar of engines, the intelligence division's travel team continued up the winding road in two lines of motorcycles.

They were wary, but fortunately, they did not notice an obvious attack or interference.

They did hear some dry gunshots in the distance, but that was normal in Lost Angels. A tow truck drove down the opposite lane with a luxury racing car in tow and a group of modified cars chased after that **Car Thief** disguised as a road service.

Quenser clung to Putana and she spoke without turning back.

"Don't worry. I don't feel any gazes on us."

"Gazes?"

"The military satellites are also mostly focused on the city of Lost Angels, so they aren't paying much attention to these mountains. Of course, that's why they can't blame anyone else for the cable cars being blown away."

Hearing that made Quenser shudder.

He did not know how much truth there was to that, but he doubted it was a mere bluff or assumption. This girl could use her scopophobia as a weapon, so just how much of a threat to the Princess would she be inside an Object?

(I'm really glad we got rid of that possibility ahead of time.)

"Teacher?"

"Nothing! Did my smoldering gaze send a tingle down your spine, Putana?"

Before long, the group of motorcycles arrived at the hydroelectric power station partway up the mountain.

Millia Newburg gave them a casual wave from the parking lot.

"Let's get started. We're using Quenser's idea. We'll set up the pumps to draw the water from the reservoir, so you all lay out the pipeline in the smuggling tunnels."

"Understood."

Quenser and Heivia hopped down from the motorcycles and walked over to the back of the trucks, but Heivia frowned after opening the metal doors.

“What’s this? There’s only enough for one hundred meters! That’s not enough to get the water all the way through the mountain!!”

“How many trucks do you think we’d need to carry that much pipework around? We’d stand out too much if we did that and it’s all over if the Faith Organization gets suspicious.”

“Then what do we do!?”

“I’ve marked certain spots on the map. We’ll divide the ant colony of tunnels into the human pathway and the water pathway. We just have to cover up all of the branches from the water one to make it a single route. If we pour water in there like a flash flood, it’ll work just like a pipe.”

Quenser pointed his thumb back at the hydroelectric power station.

“Lost Angels’s power is unstable and blackouts are common, right? The data we have says the power company had started to add more turbines but stopped construction for a variety of reasons. There should be bags of quick-dry cement piled up like sandbags, so let’s borrow those.”

“Well, isn’t that nice. You’re suggesting we steal civil property like it’s nothing. You really have been dyed in the colors of Lost Angels, haven’t you?”

“Did you know cement has an expiration date? They’d have to throw those things out like box lunches at a convenience store anyway. Another nation’s military is disposing of it for them, so they should actually thank us.”

“Yeah, and readily making excuses like that is also part of the Lost Angels way of life. Let’s call this being ecological. That stuff would be wasted in the hands of those morons.”

The two idiots continued to complain as they smashed the lock to the giant storehouse next to the power station. The bags of cement looked a lot like bags of rice or flour, but they were a lot heavier.

The very first one just about crushed Quenser.

“You idiot! Quenser, don’t you know being frail is only a plus for sheltered rich girls!?”

“What is this…? Am I a slave being forced to build the pyramids?”

While Quenser groaned from the floor, the delicate-looking Putana Highball quickly placed three of the bags over her shoulder.

“Teacher.” Her expression was perfectly composed. “I think it’s about time we talked about what you owe me by this point.”

“Please no! If I do that with a genius Elite, I’ll end up buried in debt!!”

Quenser could not actually lift the bags of cement, so he ended up grabbing one by the edge and dragging it along.

They tied them to the back of their motorcycles with wire.

And of course, only those who could drive could sit in the driver’s seat.

“I really do think we need to talk about what you owe me.”

“No, wait. I don’t think you should judge a guy based on whether he knows how to drive a motorcycle or not. Even when I learned to play the guitar, it didn’t make me popular!!”

Heivia and Putana drove their off-road motorcycles into the smuggling tunnel, leaving Quenser and his complaints behind.

Millia came over to check on the boy as he spread a map on the hood of a car and checked the route with a military flashlight.

“Is everything going well?”

“Yes, assuming my calculations are correct, using the giant pump to pour water into this one point will split along a number of routes but ultimately turn the opposite slopes of these three mountains into a water slide. If we can lure the Flyaway in, we can seal off his static electricity legs. There’s no escape for him.”

“From here, we can’t tell what’s happening on the other side, so you tell us when to send in the water.”

“Understood.”

In less than an hour, Heivia and Putana returned.

“This guy’s been flirting with a beautiful woman while we were out there sweating and doing construction work. Just how much are you going to enjoy the Lost Angels way of life!?”

“Rewarding the slacker feels like a rebellion against society to me,” added Putana.

After waiting for the other off-road motorcycles to get back, Quenser, Millia, and the others completely sealed off the tunnel entrance after connecting the two meter wide plastic pipe running from the giant pump.

Millia clapped her hands.

“Okay, head to the other side of the mountains through another tunnel. It’s time for round two.”

“Got it. Hey, Putana, you heard her, so let me ride your ass again.”

Quenser hopped onto the back of Putana’s off-road motorcycle. Since he was researching cool ways to get on, he had likely gotten used to being treated as baggage.

As a jack of all trades, Heivia had no girl with him and he was muttering under his breath with a look in his eyes that suggested he was in serious need of some counseling.

“Maybe I should just throw away my license.”

“Listen, Heivia. You only score some points with their protective instincts if you *can’t* do it. If you *can* but you *don’t*, you aren’t going to catch any girl’s heart.”

“Teacher, can I just throw you off now?”

Regardless, Putana and Heivia drove their motorcycles into a different smuggling tunnel hidden partway up the mountain path.

There were no lights inside, so they only had the unreliable illumination of their headlights. The tunnel was less than two meters wide and the ground was bumpy since it was hand-dug. Also, it had only been dug out, so there were no pillars or concrete to reinforce it.

Instead of an occult test of courage, it felt more suited for a

frightening theme park attraction.

“This really feels handmade. It’s like a tunnel someone made for a summer project.”

There were concrete walls here and there, but they were probably what Heivia and the others had made from the quick-drying concrete.

The pathway for dozens of tons of water was on the other side of those walls.

After traveling about seven kilometers, they left the tunnel on the other side of the mountain.

They braked and viewed the mountain scenery from the tunnel exit.

“Looks like the Princess has gotten started,” said Heivia while still sitting on his motorcycle.

A low, heavy roar echoed around them like storm clouds approaching from the distance.

That was the sound of a static electricity propulsion device.

“Sounds like we’ve poked at the hornet’s nest well enough. That king of chickens is showing himself!!”

Something like a giant insect sat on the slope like a row of fangs belonging to some ferocious beast towering into the heavens.

That nuke-resistant insect had eight legs and a removable main cannon attached to its fattened spherical body.

It sent out the White Flag signal with reckless abandon and it had no problem making civilian sacrifices to get a shot in.

Quenser gulped and named the crazed insect.

“The Faith Organization’s Second Generation Object, the Flyaway!!”

Part 9

Despite everything else going on, the main player on the battlefield was the Princess and the Baby Magnum, so Quenser held his radio in one hand as he waited with the others.

“The enemy falls back as soon as he fires his first shot, so to catch him in our trap, you need to delay his first shot as much as possible and lure him as far forward as you can. Don’t give him a chance to aim. Keep firing to force him to move left and right while you back away bit by bit. That will draw him over this way.”

“Understood, Quenser.”

“He believes he can escape no matter what, so he’ll get bolder. It shouldn’t be too hard to have him get carried away. If you’re confident enough, you can even pretend to slip on the steep slope. He should jump at that chance.”

“So I just have to ensure my safety while intentionally stimulating his greed? That should be easy.”

As Quenser spoke with the Princess via radio, Putana observed the boy from the side.

That Pilot Elite would bring about the conclusion, she held everyone’s lives in her hands, and everyone relied on her.

That should have been Putana’s place, too.

“Hm? What is it?” asked Quenser.

“Nothing.”

An ear-splitting explosion tore through the mountains.

The Baby Magnum’s coilgun main cannon had ripped through the air at supersonic speeds to create a sonic boom as it instantly flew toward the Flyaway.

Using that as its cue, the Flyaway also began to move.

The enemy Object moved in a small circle on the steep slope to avoid the shell and then approached the Baby Magnum.

Its main cannon was made from a honeycomb of containers and it creaked as it aimed.

It specialized in a spray of attacks that filled an entire surface.

To put it another way, it was a one-time attack that had to be held in reserve.

Or so they had thought, but it was acting oddly.

Explosive sounds burst from the Flyaway again and again.

Instead of its main cannon, it was firing smaller railguns and rapid-fire beam cannons that were of no use in an Object vs. Object

battle.

“Wah!?”

“That bastard is destroying this mountain!!”

Quenser and the others frantically got down as a concerning crumbling sound came from overhead…no, near the peak of the mountain. A full-on landslide had apparently begun further down and a wall of dust completely enveloped and hid everything near the surface.

The Princess’s Baby Magnum was no exception.

All of the dirt flowed down the slope, the slope itself began to fall, and it all continued further and further down. That overwhelming current slowed the Baby Magnum’s movements. Staying put on the slope was the most it could manage and it could not keep up its sharp movements.

“Not good. The Princess has been stopped! If that thing gets close, she’ll be turned to Swiss cheese by its main cannon!!”

“But there’s nothing we can do. Even if six of her main cannons are blown away and the spherical main body is blasted open like an empty can, we’ll still win if she can move at the end. We need him to get carried away and get close. Otherwise, our trap won’t work!!”

The Flyaway approached further when it saw the Princess’s confusion.

It was now within range of its main cannon.

“Hey!”

“Not yet!! If he’s only on the edge of the effective range, he’ll just escape backwards once it starts. We need to lure him into the center of the effective range so he’ll be swept away by the water slide no matter which way he tries to escape!!”

The Princess could no longer put on an act.

Based on how much she was struggling, it seemed certain the Flyaway was going to win.

The Flyaway continued to advance.

It approached the vertical slope looking down on Quenser's group.

"Okay."

The student pressed his thumb down on his radio's switch.

The shortened number sent out a sign to Millia Newburg and the others waiting on the other side of the mountain. That single button set the giant pump in motion, so dozens of tons of water would be sent from the reservoir and onto the slopes of the three mountains, turning them into water slides.

The running feet would be stopped.

"Okay!! Millia, do it! Now!!"

He heard a light click and then a low rumbling shook the entire mountain. The tunnel Quenser's group had traveled through had been separated for human use, so the water would not flow through it. Still, the vibration of the water in the other tunnel reached them here.

However…

"Hey, Quenser, something isn't right."

"It isn't making a water slide. It doesn't look like any water is flowing out of the other tunnel exits."

Quenser turned around in shock.

Small fragments were falling from the ceiling of the hand-dug tunnel there.

"Oh, no… Oh, no!!"

"Quenser, explain this," demanded the Princess over the radio.

"The Flyaway's bombardment caused the hand-dug tunnels to collapse! The impromptu pipeline for the water is full of cracks and is useless! Princess, change of plans. Fire your main cannon to the coordinates I'm about to-…"

He trailed off as the situation continued to develop.

"No, wait. If the water pipeline isn't working, where is that rumbling coming from!?"

“The plan failed because the water did not follow the proper route,” said Putana. “That means…”

“Dammit.” Quenser’s face stiffened. “Is it flowing down this tunnel!?”

They did not have time to brace themselves.

A tremendous torrent of water burst from the mountain and mercilessly knocked them into the air.

Part 10

The fountain of water was much smaller than in the original plan.

It would not have been enough to stop the Object had it been caught by it, but it was more than enough to sweep away some flesh-and-blood humans.

“Gaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah hhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!???”

They rolled and slipped down. Quenser’s group fell down the giant slide along with quite a lot of dirt and rubble.

They were caught by something partway down the mountain.

If not for that, they may really have fallen all the way to the bottom of the cliff.

“Damn…it… What just happened?”

Quenser still could not move properly, but he reached for his radio. However, there was no response when he pressed the button. Whether due to the fall or the mud, it seemed to be broken.

(You’ve got to be kidding me.)

An ominously deep rumbling continued on the slope above and the Flyaway was still on the move.

It was the type to shoot once and then flee, so it did not have time to focus on something other than its true target.

(He'll get away again at this rate. The Princess will be worn down if this ridiculous game of tag continues. We need to find a way to blow him away tonight!!)

He steadied himself by grabbing onto something like a broken pillar sticking out from the muddy slope, he looked around again, and he finally realized where he was.

"The cable car station?"

"Yup, the one with the one-way trip to heaven thanks to that slaughter of civilians. It's a good thing the cable cars were stopped after the accident and no one was left inside the station."

He heard his awful friend's voice.

Still clinging to the pillar, he looked back and saw Heivia covered in mud.

"What happened to Putana?"

"I don't know, but she's wearing the same kind of special suit as the Princess, right? I doubt she would die so easily."

At any rate, the two idiots moved from the unstable, muddy slope and into the half-destroyed station building.

Now that they could finally catch their breath, Heivia asked a question.

"What do we do now?"

"What we need to do hasn't changed."

"The water slide plan? That was a failure! There's nothing we can do now that the tunnel for the water has collapsed!!"

"Are you sure? There's still a chance we can pull it off."

"You mean cause a landslide like the Flyaway did? But he was whizzing across the slope he made collapse!!"

"That's not what I meant. Regardless, we have to move to where we can set this up."

Quenser switched on his military flashlight and cut across the collapsed building.

He was searching for a maintained mountain-climbing trail, but he stopped before reaching the exit.

“There’s a staff room.”

“Hey, it couldn’t hurt to check for a map or something. The locals might have marked animal trails not on the official maps.”

The door was already broken and dirt from the landslide had gotten inside.

Everything was covered in mud, but they still found some documents.

“A business journal? No, it’s too small for that. A private journal, then? It’s not from the station staff…so the drivers? Did they take turns making entries in here?”

“That thing’s not going to tell you the secret to defeating that monstrous weapon. Quit getting sidetracked.”

“But this….”

Quenser frowned as he flipped through the pages.

Most of the pages were too covered in mud to open, but some were unharmed.

This is what they said:

“May 1: They came by again. I can’t exactly complain when they’re giving me money, but with how much trouble this is, I wish they’d do it somewhere else.”

“May 13: Today’s the day. I don’t know what the point of this is, but I’ll just do as I was told. I only have to send out the cars without anyone on them, so it’s not all that difficult a job.”

“What is this?”

They’re giving me money

Today’s the day.

I’ll just do as I was told.

I only have to send out the cars without anyone on them.

“Hey, Heivia. The story was that all eighty-nine cable car passengers died, right?”

“Hold up. Are you saying…?”

Suddenly, a transmission from an ally reached Heivia’s radio.

“I can’t get through to teacher’s radio, but is he there?”

“Putana?”

“I’m down below, but I seem to have found something unbelievable.”

Putana Highball was clearly a little bit shaken.

“No, maybe I should say it’s what I haven’t found.”

“Let me guess.” Quenser cut in from the side. “You’re at the site of the accident, but you can’t find the corpses that should be strewn all over the place. Is that it?”

Part 11

Putana Highball stood near the bent, twisted, and broken cable car rail.

Moving around her military flashlight was enough to spot the cars that had fallen and lost their connections.

However…

“Yes, that’s exactly it, teacher. I can’t find anything that might be corpses.”

The accident had occurred earlier that same day. With bodies covering a large area, it would take at least a day or two to recover them all.

Nevertheless, there was not even one in evidence.

In fact, there was not even a single bloodstain or possession of the deceased.

“That’s an area of suspicion,” explained Quenser. “If either the Legitimacy Kingdom or Faith Organization’s investigation team holds a press conference, their credibility will only be about 50/50. If they insist there were no bodies or that the people vanished, the other side will claim they stole the evidence and it will all end in a giant gray zone. Someone used that situation to pull off a large-scale kidnapping.”

“Then what happened to the people who were supposed to be on the cable cars?”

“Wait a second. Wait, wait. One of the computers here is still functioning. There might still be some surveillance camera footage on here.”

Putana turned off her military flashlight and held her breath.

The bottom of the valley grew pitch black, but she confidently sharpened her eyes.

(I sense a gaze.)

The gaze was sweeping about in every direction. She guessed they had noticed the light but did not know how many people were there. This gaze did not home in on her as if obscenely licking across her body.

(There’s just one of them. Probably a scout, or…)

She moved through the mud to avoid the gaze.

She circled around a cable car lying on its side and made her way behind the owner of the gaze.

She lightly tapped the metal surface with the back of her hand.

“!?”

She shined her extremely powerful military flashlight toward the person who turned around in surprise.

The beam of light seemed to stab into their brain and she aimed for the moment they froze in place. She took advantage of the high-capacity battery’s weight to use the flashlight like a club and beat them on the side of the head.

They groaned after collapsing to the dirt, so she beat them a second

and third time to knock them out cold.

She fished through their pockets and found a cellphone, a wallet, and an ID.

“I found a Faith Organization scout,” she whispered into her radio. “However, he isn’t from the Garuda’s…I mean, the Flyaway’s unit. I think he’s from Viridian Edge, the Faith Organization gang back in the city.”

She also found a handgun, but it was the type with a maintenance chip contained in the grip cover. It had a GPS transmitter embedded inside. The transmitter required a special tool to remove, so she gave up on it.

Once the transmitter stopped moving, the main unit would quickly notice something was wrong.

Regardless, Putana checked the data on the cellphone.

It seemed he really was part of an intelligence agency. The machine’s default password lock was one thing, but the data inside was encrypted and there was nothing she could do. However, she could still see the filenames and a few terms stuck out to her.

“Nataraja?”

Back in the cable car station, Quenser and Heivia checked through the surveillance camera footage on the functioning computer.

They were most interested in the footage from just before the accident.

“Oh, goddammit,” groaned Heivia “There it is.”

The grainy footage showed several masked men walking across the cable car station’s platform. A few dozen people who seemed to be on a trip were being led outside the building with their hands up.

Lastly, the cable cars in question were sent out empty.

“It’s a large-scale kidnapping. But what for? Are they going to be making a bunch of ransom calls with helium voices?”

The masked men must not have expected this footage to remain.

It was possible the bribed worker…no, driver had failed to delete it to keep as a sort of “insurance”.

“We have no way of tracking down the masked men, but what about the kidnapped people? It looks like a lot of them are kids, but we can actually see their faces. Is there no kind of hint?”

“I don’t have any powerful facial recognition software if that’s what you’re asking. …No, but wait.”

“What is it?”

“These kids all have the same badge on their chests. Can you zoom in on that?”

“It’ll probably still be really grainy.”

Quenser did as he was told and Heivia fell silent.

After a while, the rich noble spoke up.

“These kids are probably from the Capitalist Corporations. They’re from California Biochemistry University. That school of geniuses loves taking in kids who skipped grades, so they produce tons of nine or ten year olds with PhDs. But while they do great in academics, the kids have no social experience, so people call them a twisted factory school.”

“Why do you know so much about this? Do you have a thing for genius girls or something?”

“It’s not unusual for the Legitimacy Kingdom’s royals and nobles to get genetic disorders unique to their bloodline. They can’t exactly let it get out, but it’s pretty common for people to be secretly funding projects to research their rare diseases.”

“In that case…”

“These weren’t just any old kids who were abducted. They’re all researchers with PhDs in the biochemistry field. Worst case, their heads might be packed full of technical data related to Pilot Elites.”

“Then this kidnapping wasn’t for a ransom.” Quenser gulped. “This is talent trafficking. Are they going to sell them on the black market as current or future talent?”

Talent trafficking.

Putana Highball recalled that dreadful word.

That form of organized crime was especially common in the safe countries of the Capitalist Corporations. Small children expected to be geniuses were abducted and they were legally recognized as someone else who “simply looks a lot like them” thanks to an army of corporate lawyers abusing the fact that a DNA test will not get a 100% match even with a sample from the same person. Afterwards, they were sold to a large company that wanted their talent.

There was an element of luck in whether the child would actually become a genius, but Putana had heard that made it a target for financial speculators.

(This was a case of talent trafficking?)

As she looked at the cable cars lying here and there, she felt anger scorching her nerves.

She did not know what the word Nataraja in “their” cellphone meant, but…

(Were they targeted by a local group while here on a trip? Or was the trip itself part of the kidnapping plan?)

She had no guarantee, but she felt she should assume it was the latter.

Capitalist Corporations safe countries had specialized school PMCs to completely guard the children from talent trafficking, but there was an opening as soon as they entered a country without that system.

Not to mention that anywhere near Lost Angels was an odd choice for a trip. It seemed likely it was chosen because it would make the children easy to abduct.

“Teacher.”

After some thought, Putana brought the radio to her mouth.

“I knocked out one of their scouts, so the main unit should show up soon. However, that also means their main unit is probably still nearby. If I check around here, I might be able to take out the talent

trafficking group."

"The main unit? You mean the abducted children might not have been taken away just yet?"

"It's possible. For one, it can't be easy to sneak out more than eighty people. It would be reasonable to assume they would wait until it was dark to start moving, don't you think?"

"Understood, Putana. But you don't have a gun, do you? We'll head there and-…"

"No."

A rumbling shook the mountains.

The Baby Magnum and the Flyaway were still battling on the steep slope. And since the surprise attack had failed, the Flyaway would have the upper hand on its home turf.

"You two head back up. If the Baby Magnum is taken out, we lose our escape route. Even if we did rescue the eighty or more people, it would be impossible to sneak all of them out without being caught by the Object's sensors."

"Putana…"

"Please go."

The girl in a green special suit directly denied him as she stared into the darkness.

"I will be taking the credit today, teacher."

Part 12

Quenser and Heivia both clicked their tongues in the half-destroyed station.

"What do we do, Quenser!?"

"Putana has a point. Even if we do rescue the hostages, they'll be slaughtered just for being with Legitimacy Kingdom soldiers if we

don't take out the Flyaway. More importantly, we don't know where Putana is and we'll never find her if we just randomly search through the mountains!"

Also, if the cable car incident had been part of a talent trafficking plot, then there was a good chance the Flyaway was in on it. It was not clear whether he was leading the crime or if he had been paid off, but either way, he would try to erase the evidence if it fell apart.

"Dammit. Then let's hurry up and deal with the problem up there. Without the Object's anti-air lasers, we can have a helicopter sent in."

They were reluctant, but every second they waited only worsened the situation.

Staying where they were would not improve things.

"Anyway, we need to climb back up to where we slid down. …Hey, Quenser. What's that you've got there?"

"The driver's journal from before."

"What use is that now!?"

"Don't be so sure it's useless."

"?"

They rushed from the station building and chose a relatively gentle route up the slope. All the while, they heard the intermittent rumbling of Object cannons.

The Baby Magnum was not the only one firing.

"Hey, something isn't right."

Heivia came to a stop and his cowardly fear – his proper fear of an Object – rose to the surface.

"The Princess isn't the only one firing. In fact, it looks like the Flyaway is sending out the fiercer bombardment!"

"Why? The Flyaway's main cannon is meant to be abandoned, right!? Isn't that thing supposed to use all of its firepower at once and then run away!?"

Part 13

After Quenser and the others slid down the mountain slope, a lot had happened between the Baby Magnum and the Flyaway.

First of all, the plan to transform the three mountains into giant water slides had failed.

That meant the Flyaway had an overwhelming advantage in speed on the steep slopes.

In no time at all, it had taken up the ideal firing position.

The container main cannon attached to the front of the machine gave a roar and it sprayed a fan-shaped downpour of coilgun fire at tremendous speed.

The sounds of the air being torn apart mixed together and reverberated throughout the area like a high-pitched whistle.

The Baby Magnum's spherical body was worn down, orange sparks surrounded it, and two of its seven main cannons were torn off and blown away.

"Kh!?"

But it was not crushed.

It did not break.

Even in that hopeless position, the Princess moved her machine around to use the smallest possible movements to avoid a fatal blow in the torrent of shells.

Her opponent's container main cannon was mostly a one-use weapon.

No matter how close to death it brought her, she could strike back as long as she overcame this fierce attack.

Finally, that moment came.

The Flyaway released the container main cannon just like a lizard tail. With some ammunition remaining, it would wander around the

battlefield using something like insect legs. That left the slight possibility of it reconnecting and firing again. While the enemy was worried about that, the Flyaway would make its escape. That was the cannon's role here.

But firing the main cannon without a connection to the reactor was impossible, so the Princess could ignore it.

She quickly accelerated the Baby Magnum.

She approached all at once while the Flyaway fell back and fired its smaller cannons toward the mountain peaks. It was trying to create landslides to stop the Baby Magnum.

(The movement of the landslides doesn't change. If I can predict the pattern and make course corrections, I can reduce the lost time.)

She kept at it and continued her pursuit.

The Baby Magnum slid into position at the proper distance and angle to kill the Flyaway before that other Object could cross the ridgeline and vanish.

But then the Flyaway's front two legs bent sharply.

It looked a lot like when an innocent child twisted and ripped off an insect's legs.

However, this meant something else entirely.

For one thing, those were not legs.

They had a muzzle on the end.

"A low-stability plasma cannon!? The Flyaway has two main cannons!?"

The Princess frantically switched over to evasive action, but it was far too late.

The Flyaway had more than one ideal strategy.

The first was to wear down the enemy Object by continually spraying shells and releasing its main cannon while abusing the White Flag signal to ensure its safety.

The second was to wait for the enemy to expect the first strategy

and let its guard down when the main cannon was removed. Then, it would fire straight through its enemy with its second main cannon in a surprise attack.

The blinding beam of a low-stability plasma cannon flew toward the Princess at close range.

Part 14

Quenser and Heivia felt an unpleasant sweat cover their bodies when they saw the beam of light sweeping through the air.

“Dammit, what has the electronic simulation division been doing!? Their specs were completely wrong!!”

“Complaining isn’t going to help. Whatever the situation, we have to make sure the Princess wins!”

“But how!? He’s faster on these steep slopes and he’s firing a second main cannon even after abandoning his container one! This is getting worse and worse, so the Princess is just going to be worn down!!”

“And I’m saying we have to turn that around somehow. Come with me!”

The mountains shook ominously as the two of them worked at climbing the slope.

They felt an extra large tremor, so the Flyaway had probably damaged the Princess with its plasma main cannon, regrouped with its container main cannon, and started firing the remaining coilgun shells.

How far had the Baby Magnum been worn down?

Was the Princess okay?

Could they all leave this battle alive?

Heivia nervously turned toward the noise, but the student was not looking toward the Flyaway. He walked along with his eyes glued

to the muddy driver's journal.

"Wait, wait, wait. What are you going to learn from that thing!? There's a horrifying monster right in front of us, you know!?"

"Shut up. And Heivia, hand over your radio. Mine's broken."

"Fine, but what are you going to do!?"

"That thing's so full of secrets that we'd never have a complete idea of its systems if we checked over everything one by one. More importantly, the Princess might not last that long. It's being a little forceful, but we have to move things along ourselves."

"What can we possibly do after all this!? The water slide using the smuggling tunnels was a failure and he can whiz along the slope during a landslide! Can you really put together a way of defeating it like some kind of adlibbed recipe!?"

"Like I said, we'll use this."

Quenser gently shook the muddy journal and said more to Heivia who clearly did not understand.

"We'll take them out with what they left behind."

Part 15

"For example, people can sense light across their entire body. There was even an experiment that found shining a powerful light on the back of the knees could adjust the time people woke up in the morning. Because people have some faint sense of light even with their eyes shut, it is possible to prepare for in attack from any direction if trained properly."

Putana recalled the words of the witch doctor who had examined her body.

"But that doesn't seem to be what's happening with you. A lot is still unknown about the process you use to directly sense other people's gazes. When we line up a bunch of identical cameras, you can accurately tell us which ones are active, and that isn't normal.

Yes, yes. This is a truly fascinating case."

Even the girl who used it did not understand exactly how it worked, but she did know how to use it as an Elite's weapon.

"…"

Putana slowly closed her eyes in the almost pure darkness at the bottom of the valley.

The surges of invisible pressure were much like flashlights being rudely pointed this way and that. After estimating their locations and directions, she opened her eyes again and continued on while avoiding each one.

Not much had been done to keep rocks from falling into the valley, so some rather large ones were sitting here and there. She also saw some military-looking canopied trucks. They seemed to be ones that had blown a tire on the hard rocks. No one remained inside the trucks and there was no sign of the talent trafficking children stuffed inside the back. Instead, extra shotguns and light machineguns had been left behind, so they had apparently not had time to destroy them all.

(Are they still stuck here because of the blown tires?)

Putana weaved her way between the trucks.

She sensed several gazes, but one of them had an odd color to it.

She moved through the darkness to approach the gaze that trembled in fear and she reached an arm around from behind the person.

It was a boy of about ten.

"Mgh!?"

"Be quiet," she whispered while dragging him behind a truck.

She turned the boy around to get a look at him and placed her index finger on her lips.

She then whispered a question from close by.

"Are you one of the children from the cable cars?"

"…"

The boy nodded again and again.

"They all went over there."

"Over there?"

"To the Star. …They're all going to get on the Star. I decided it was too strange and ran off at the last second, though."

"The Star?"

She doubted the kidnappers could trick the children onto a car or airplane. They were young, but they were geniuses who already had PhDs. With that much involvement in the world of adults, those cold-eyed children would see nothing in that kind of farce.

In that case, was it some kind of metaphor?

What mattered was that this boy had parted ways with the other children.

"Did any other children escape with you?"

"No. They all happily continued on to the Star. And yet none of us has actually seen what it is."

That was when the randomly searching gazes gained a singular focus like iron sand being sucked in by a magnet. An unpleasant sensation ran down Putana's back and the gazes focused on the other side of the truck.

Whether a shadow or footprints, they had detected something.

Someone would be sent here to check, so she could not wait around any longer.

Still crouching down, she placed her hands on the boy's shoulders and looked straight at him.

"Listen. You need to turn around and keep running in that direction. If you keep running in a straight line with the truck in the way, you will remain hidden from the hunters for a bit. Ignore any difference in height and keep running even if you have to climb over a hill."

“Eh? But…”

“And then…”

Without letting him speak, she removed a hand from his shoulder and pulled out a card-sized firearm attached with reusable tape to her nurse-like green special suit.

It was a one-use flare gun.

“This will send a scramble signal to the white collars, Faith Organization navy experts that work with the Object rather than Viridian Edge. A unit commanded by the major won’t have been corrupted. After making it one hundred meters…no, two hundred, point this straight up and pull the trigger. The military satellite will detect the flash signal and the white collars will come to rescue you.”

“You aren’t running away?”

“I…”

Her way was cut off by Viridian Edge, the Faith Organization intelligence agency disguised as a gang, and the Clovers also known as white collars were also from the Faith Organization. As a runaway, she might as well have been surrounded.

However, she did not let that fact show on her face as she responded.

“I have something I have to do, so you go on ahead and tell them honestly everything that happened here. It would be bad to hide anything. Do you understand?”

“Yes…”

The boy seemed hesitant, but his small fingertips finally touched the flare gun.

He grabbed the grip.

“You’ll be okay, won’t you?” he cautiously asked her. “You’ll be safe, won’t you?”

She did not reply, but she rubbed his hair instead.

After pulling a pump-action grenade launcher from the back of the

truck, she gave him a sharp command.

“Get going! Hurry!”

He left the truck as if struck by her words.

The sound of his footsteps gathered countless gazes in his direction, but Putana cut them off by moving out from behind the truck with the grenade launcher over her shoulder.

“Putana, Putana! I heard what happened from Quenser and Heivia. The smuggling tunnels have all crumbled or flooded, but we’re searching the routes for a way to send reinforcements to the bottom of the valley. Do you think you can last that long!?”

Millia spoke over the radio, but Putana paid little attention.

“There is no need. I will end it all before you even arrive.”

“Hold on. I thought Elites were supposed to be the steel queens of a clever and clean battlefield.”

A noise much like the removal of a champagne cork sounded behind her.

The burning of the chemicals in the flare scattered bright red light overhead and Putana Highball calmly responded with that light behind her.

“Not today.”

With a movement of her index finger, the girl used explosives to mow down the spies disguised as gang members.

The battle had begun.

Part 16

In the Legitimacy Kingdom, it was known as the Flyaway.

In the Faith Organization, it was known as the Garuda.

The male Pilot Elite inside that Second Generation Object’s fully-

protected cockpit was irritated. He still had the upper hand against the enemy Object pinned to the steep slope, but that meant he had gone this long without getting a lethal shot in.

He had released his coilgun main cannon, picked it back up with the tube-shaped manipulator, and reconnected it.

After firing it again, it had no remaining ammunition. He could always abandon it, but he wanted to avoid any possibility of the technology being captured.

The low-stability plasma cannon disguised as the front two feet was only meant for close-range surprise attacks. Its power was far lower than the container one and he could not seem to get a clean hit in after the enemy just barely avoided the first shot.

It was probably about time to leave.

For one thing, it was strange for him to spend more than ten minutes on a single battle.

His enemy was damaged enough that he could easily escape even with the container main cannon.

The communication line to the maintenance base zone entered the back of his mind. He only had to press the button to contact them and the base commander would send out the White Flag signal. That was how it was set up.

However…

“Ksshh…kssshhh! Hey…ksshh…can you hear me, you piece of shit…ksshh!?”

“…?”

Someone had cut in over the radio.

It was an extremely weak signal with only the most basic encryption.

It was not the Faith Organization’s format, so it was probably from the enemy, the Legitimacy Kingdom.

“That sure was an awful thing to do: Bribing a cable car driver, kidnapping a bunch of children on an overseas trip for talent trafficking, and then placing the blame on us. You probably felt

pretty safe because the back and forth between PR offices would leave it all a giant gray zone even if some evidence was found. … But did you really think it would turn out like that?"

The Object's large-scale communication equipment could immediately locate the source of the signal.

Determining the exact location was hardly difficult in the empty mountains.

"We've got the driver's journal and it seems the security camera footage was left behind. We already know what you did. The only question is how exactly to reveal it to the public."

"The cable cars were empty. I didn't actually kill anyone."

"Don't be ridiculous. If you look at how the cable cars work, they can't be sent out completely empty. You might have saved the children since they were your merchandise, but you blew away the driver along with the cable cars. We're going to make sure you pay for that."

"He wasn't innocent. He took our money."

"Don't act so righteous when you killed him to keep him quiet. Besides, if you hadn't offered him the money, he never would have left the straight and narrow. You know what? That man you killed took the job to search for his daughter who had disappeared one day. He didn't do it for the money; he did it so he could catch you people."

"…"

"So as I said, we're going to make sure you pay for that. You can't stop us now. You can sit there in your nuke-resistant room trembling in fear as you wait for the lid to be peeled away, you villain."

However, the Pilot Elite grinned.

The search was complete.

The signal was coming from behind some rocks at the top of a mountain approximately three hundred meters away.

He immediately aimed there and accurately fired the low-stability

plasma cannon at the source of the signal.

In an instant, the entire slope boiled and whoever was sending the signal was vaporized.

Part 17

Putana Highball held a pump-action grenade launcher.

It looked like a fatter shotgun. She loaded a grenade by sliding the foregrip attached below the rest of the weapon and she pulled the trigger to fire. Instead of a bullet, it fired an explosive the size of a can of coffee. Once it landed, it scattered shrapnel and an explosive blast, creating a ten meter radius of casualties.

Each time she fired, the roughly-dressed soldiers flew through the air and even the military trucks spewed flames and tumbled along the ground. This weapon was far more powerful than a normal gun. Even if her opponent hid behind some rocks, she could fire the grenade in an arc so it landed beyond the rocks and turned her targets to mincemeat.

“Putana, you…traitorrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!”

Someone yelled at her with blood covering their face.

Multiple handgun and submachinegun triggers were pulled at once.

Dry gunshots rang out again and again, but none of them reached Putana. She was not hiding behind cover. She instead twisted her body in midair like a gymnast or figure skater and slipped past every last line of fire.

No, it was not the lines of fire she saw.

She sensed the gazes of the ones wielding the guns.

She fought back with the explosives.

Small explosions occurred here and there, screams were drowned out, and lives were cut short.

(It will take at least ten minutes for the real Faith Organization soldiers to arrive after noticing the flare. I have to hold them back until then.)

She hid in the black smoke and fired grenade after grenade from the open ejection port.

She slid the foregrip and turned the muzzle toward her former allies.

Wind blew along the bottom of the valley and cleared away the smoke.

All of the gazes stabbed into her and bullets flew toward her with twice the intensity of before.

No matter who was firing them, bullets were bullets.

Putana fired her pump-action grenade launcher while constantly twisting around to avoid the gazes, but there were too many of them.

The dry gunshots were accompanied by heavy impacts in her ribs and just above her navel.

“Ha…ha ha! Take that, you disgrace!!”

“Kh.”

She clenched her teeth and pulled the trigger while doubled over. Whoever had gloated was blown to smithereens.

A Pilot Elite’s special suit was made to endure any climate or environment, but it also contained high-level protection against bullets and blades. A submachinegun scattering 9mm handgun bullets would not be fatal unless she took one directly to the forehead.

However, it was not as effective as the bulletproof vests in movies and dramas.

(Ow!! My organs are crying out. I can’t let myself get hit five or six times in the same spot!!)

The bullets would not pierce her body, but that was all. The shock of impact still propagated inside, so multiple hits could easily break bones or injure organs.

More importantly, if the damage locked up her movements, she would be hit again and again.

She would no longer be able to use her ability to accurately sense gazes as an attack.

(There's no turning back. If I swallow the pain and take out more of the enemy, I can reduce the number of bullets coming my way!!)

She pulled the grenade launcher's trigger some more.

Her repeated evasion and attack had almost become a pure attempt to crush her enemy.

“Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhh

It was a mass of composite armor.

It used humanoid arms and legs and it wielded a weapon.

“A powered suit!?

The roughly-dressed spies had only needed to buy enough time for it to activate.

Putana clicked her tongue and released more grenades from her weapon, but the can-sized explosives could not destroy that armor even with a direct hit.

She could only watch as the powered suit leisurely pulled the cocking lever of its heavy machinegun.

It loaded the first round and aimed the muzzle toward her.

That weapon had enough destructive power to slice a bulletproof vehicle apart, so she would be turned to mincemeat even with her bulletproof special suit.

“!!!???”

She first jumped behind a military truck.

A moment later, a storm of bullets blew by and the entire truck was enveloped in explosive flames and blown away.

Part 18

The Flyaway blew away the entire mountain slope like it was crushing a bug.

The radio signal vanished, so no traces would remain of the soldiers accusing the Pilot Elite.

“Did you really think that would work, you idiot?”

Quenser laughed quietly as he hid on a different slope, far removed from the blast site.

He held a handheld device that had been linked to the radio

sending out the “obvious” signal. The Flyaway had only destroyed Heivia’s radio which had been relaying the signal. The radio and the handheld device had been communicating via a laser signal, so that connection had not been detected at the same time.

“Wait, wait, wait. Tricking him’s all well and good, but what do we do now!? It might be true that we can catch him off guard now that he thinks we’re dead, but he’s too fast, heavy, and – most of all – solid! What can we do to fight!?”

“You don’t need to think that hard.” Quenser sounded cheerful. “After all, it’s already over.”

“What?”

Heivia’s confusion was immediately followed by the mountain slope being torn away. This collapse was much larger than the previous landslides. Almost the entire slope of a mountain slid straight down, along with the Flyaway that had fired on it.

“Wh-what the hell!?”

“Hint 1: These mountains are filled with smuggling tunnels made by the Capitalist Corporations. We used them as a water pipeline, but that failed. Now, where did that water end up? It had nowhere to go, so it would still be filling the mountain.”

Quenser raised a finger each time.

“Hint 2: Safe country cities sometimes experience landslides on a much larger scale than the hill or mountain should have allowed for. These are called deep-seated landslides. When an underground reservoir gathered on a mountain quickly exceeds its limits after a strong burst of rain, the entire slope can slide down.”

“Wait a second! You don’t mean…!!”

“Hint 3.”

Quenser bent his fingers down to clench a fist.

“That idiot fired a finishing blow when the mountain slope was already full of water. What do you think happens then?”

A frighteningly powerful landslide swept down, carrying the Flyaway with it. Its eight legs – or was it six if you removed the

ones camouflaging its second main cannon? – used their static electricity propulsion devices to their fullest in an attempt to hold its ground, but…

“Hey, what’s going on? That damn insect is sliding right on down!”

“Of course he is. This deep-seated landslide isn’t just dry earth. I told you the mountain is full of water, remember!? The static electricity propulsion devices are weak against water, so there’s nothing they can do with this muddy landslide!!”

That was why Quenser had only needed to get him to fire a shot at his own footing.

He had only needed a radio to disguise his location and some kind of material to anger the Pilot Elite.

Even a journal left by someone no longer among the living had been enough.

“Did you look down on him for being a normal person? Well, you lost to that cable car driver you killed.”

The Flyaway gave up trying to stay put and instead tried to maintain some control while falling down into the valley.

However, it did not manage even that.

It wobbled and lost its balance.

“Have a nice long taste of muddy defeat!!”

Once it collapsed, it was over.

Like a snowball rolling down a hill, there was no stopping it. Whether on its main cannons or legs, it rolled and rolled, crushing its own equipment under its weight. The king of the mountain fell to the bottom of the valley in no time at all.

The Baby Magnum’s remaining main cannons and even its spherical body were heated to a glowing orange, but it still aimed those remaining cannons toward the valley bottom.

However, it did not fire.

The two idiots could guess what the Princess was thinking.

“Hey, do you think that guy is still breathing inside that cockpit?”

“Let’s bet on it. I’ve got one hundred euros on him being dead.”

Part 19

Struck by the explosive blast, Putana rolled along the ground. She managed to hold onto the pump-action grenade launcher, so she adjusted her grip on it and aimed at the powered suit while still lying on the ground.

However, she did not directly target it.

That would not have broken through its armor.

The military truck right next to the powered suit probably had plenty of weapons and ammunition piled up in the back, so she mercilessly fired an explosive into it.

A tremendous explosion occurred and sizzling pain raced across Putana’s skin even from a distance.

(I did-…)

As soon as she got up, her expression froze over.

The powered suit had been knocked onto its back, but it had not stopped moving.

It slowly got up with creaking movements. Its heavy machinegun may have been bent because it did not bother picking it up.

Instead, it rushed toward the brown girl.

“…!!”

She frantically adjusted her grip on the grenade launcher and fired toward the powered suit’s feet. When it flinched back, she detonated another military truck. However, it still was not enough firepower. The powered suit was not even knocked over this time. It continued moving closer and grabbed her in its giant hand. She was squeezed by fingers that could be used to demolish a building.

“Gah…ghh…
aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!
?”

“It’s too bad, Putana.”

Someone went to the trouble of talking through the speaker.

“I never was able to become a Pilot Elite, so part of me looked up to you. I can’t help but feel so very, very sorry for you as I wonder how you could have fallen so low.”

Putana wanted to respond, but her ribs were creaking, her diaphragm was blocked off, and she could not breathe properly.

But that was why the powered suit did not notice the “ending” approaching behind it even at the very last moment.

A massive landslide poured into the bottom of the valley and swallowed up the powered suit from behind.

The mass of mud and brown water swept everything away.

It had enough force to send the massive rocks and military trucks rolling along. The powered suit was no exception. It was knocked to the ground and then swept about in the water.

At some point, the pilot may have noticed that the powered suit had let go of its target.

However, there was nothing to be done. With no sense of up or down anymore, the puny weapon was swept away like a bug down the drain.

Part 20

Three minutes after the Faith Organization military satellite detected the optical pattern of the flare, fully-equipped soldiers rushed to the bottom of the valley.

They were the Clovers.

They were also known as the white collars and they were navy experts, so one might think they were unused to fighting in the mountains or anywhere that required wearing camouflage and firing handheld weapons. However, that was not the case. They were as well trained as any marines that specialized in landing operations.

Their pure white uniforms would have been too dangerous even in the middle of the night, so they wore black cloaks over them as they descended from a transport helicopter by a single rope.

“Putana’s signal came from here.”

They were surprised by the deep-seated landslide that had transformed the valley bottom into a muddy river.

As they climbed a little from the valley bottom, they found a boy on a slight hill.

They recognized what he held.

“That’s Elite equipment. It probably belonged to Putana Highball because she superstitiously preferred outdated models.”

“Then what happened here?”

The Clovers looked to the boy.

He kept his promise.

He honestly told them what had happened without hiding anything.

“Everyone was swept away by the river.”

Part 21

A splashing sound could be heard far downstream of the muddy river created by the landslide.

Putana Highball was using both hands to somehow crawl out of the water.

“Pant, pant… Ugh… Cough, cough!!”

She coughed the water from her mouth and caught her breath.

She then lay on the ground staring up into the night sky.

What would she do now?

A few options presented themselves to the brown girl.

She could find some way of contacting them or return to the run-down hotel on her own in order to meet back up with the Legitimacy Kingdom intelligence division calling itself Azul Hive.

She could also pretend she had been drowned in the muddy river and escape the surveillance of both the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization.

No amount of work would bring the Sarasvati back, but that did not change the fact that the Legitimacy Kingdom group had been the ones to steal it from her.

On the other hand, she would lose their support if she turned on them. It was obvious what fate would await her if she had two world powers pursuing her at the same time.

Would she obey and live?

Or would she fight back and die?

She thought for a while, but she was suddenly interrupted.

Someone's face jutted into her upturned field of vision.

"Glad to see you're still alive."

It was Millia Newburg.

She smiled and held out a hand.

"No matter how it happened, we took you in, so I'm not about to lose you here."

"…"

At the very least, she did not feel the "gaze" of a military satellite.

How had the woman found her after she was swallowed up by the muddy river?

She decided not to think too much about that.

It seemed she had only one option left.

“The Flyaway has stopped moving. The Pilot Elite is probably soaking the cockpit like tomato juice from a juicer. Well, the rest is a job for the technology division. They’ll be taking it apart and bringing parts home while worrying the reactor was set to self-destruct.”

Putana grabbed Millia’s hand and unsteadily rose to her feet.

The woman’s (obviously stolen) motorcycle was stopped nearby and they both climbed onto it.

Putana wrapped her arms around the officer’s back as the motorcycle took off.

“Now, that settles that. I’ll admit Lost Angels is a worthless city, but it’s a huge plus getting to eat something other than soap-like rations while on a mission. Let’s drink as much as we can today!!”

“But I think today has already ended.”

“Then let’s keep drinking until ‘tomorrow’ is over. That’s two in such a short time! Two! And both of them were captured instead of destroyed. Of course, we can’t get conspicuous medals because we’re from the intelligence division, but we’ve done enough for the Legitimacy Kingdom to get a bronze statue at a school, don’t you think? No one’s gonna get after us if we have a bit of a party.”

“…”

Putana’s Sarasvati was one of those prizes.

The brown girl clenched her teeth a little and heard some static.

“Ksshh.”

It seemed to come from the headset on Millia’s ear.

She heard Quenser and Heivia’s voices coming from it.

“I found Putana,” said Millia. “I’ll take her back to the city, so you head to the restaurant ahead of us. The workers probably won’t be happy about how muddy you are, but they’ll warm up to us once we eat and drink and leave plenty of money for them.”

“Oh? So Putana didn’t run off? I’m surprised.”

“Does that mean she’s going to stick with us no matter what she actually thinks about us?”

The conversation was being held over the headset, so they must not have known Putana could hear them.

They had no idea that could change if she was pressing against Millia’s back with her arms around the woman’s waist.

“Hah hah!” laughed Millia. “Given her situation, she might not be able to survive any other way. I guess this was to be expected.”

“You heard her, Quenser. Aren’t you glad she isn’t some obsessive girl who’s willing to get revenge at the cost of her own life? Now you don’t have to live in fear anymore.”

“Yeah, I really am glad. I was seriously afraid she’d find out we’d been acting on an idea I came up with.”

Putana quietly bit her lip behind the commander where no one would notice anything.

When she spoke, it was only in her heart.

(I pretty much already knew that, you know?)

The rusty flavor of revenge spread through her mouth.

Her story was far from over.

Chapter 3: Obsessive Faith > > Ocean Battle of Lost Angels

Part 1

Frolaytia Capistrano smoked her long, skinny kiseru in the officer's room of a small aircraft carrier waiting in the Indian Ocean.

She was comparing the situation surrounding Lost Angels with the reports from the intelligence agents undercover on the scene.

Talent trafficking was the sale of potential geniuses to corporations and laboratories.

The Flyaway was thought to be a part of such a plan and it had been defeated, but they had no proof it was the ringleader or that everyone involved had been destroyed.

Putana Highball, who had joined them from the Faith Organization, had reported a few additional facts.

Most of the children had been moved elsewhere.

They were supposedly going to the "Star".

And the name Nataraja was involved.

"This isn't enough to say much of anything."

Frolaytia filled the room with sweet-smelling smoke as she spoke.

The information on her laptop zoomed out from a map of Lost Angels to one of the entire world. A number of red X-marks covered the map.

Those were not the locations of wars.

They were all located in large cities belonging to safe countries.

People were vanishing from large cities of the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, the Capitalist Corporations, and the Faith Organization. Plus, these were not just normal people.

They were all geniuses driving a field of research and their talents were in a variety of fields: biochemistry, mechanical engineering, low-temperature chemistry, aviation physics, and extreme environment research.

The victims were men, women, boys, and girls of all ages.

The talent trafficking Quenser and the others had mentioned was limited to young “potential geniuses”. This series of incidents included the elderly who had already achieved a stable position on the forefront of their field, so it felt like something else.

(This means the cable car incident may have only looked like the Capitalist Corporations style of talent trafficking. It may have been something else entirely. They might be targeting adults and the elderly and these targets just happened to be young.)

On top of that, the missing geniuses were experts in their fields, but combining their specialties together centered on a truly interesting genre.

Simply put…

“Outer space… The Star, huh?”

She thought about the location of Lost Angels. It contained a major base for constructing and maintaining Objects. That brought countless subsidies and spies to the area which had ruined the rule of law there, but there was a single project that had led to the city’s initial development.

(I believe it was a large-scale launch site. Although they changed their plans once they managed to import a mass driver from the Capitalist Corporations.)

According to Putana Highball, one of the abducted children had said the others had happily gone to the “Star”.

“…”

Of course, there was no way the Legitimacy Kingdom’s surveillance network would fail to detect the launch of an unidentified rocket or shuttle. If a dot on the radar could not be identified, no one could complain if it was shot down by an Object’s anti-air lasers.

However, it was too soon to laugh this off.

Something about it bothered Frolaytia.

(Honestly, that place really is a city of freedom and disaster. It keeps finding new ways to give me a headache.)

At the very end, she focused the map on the Indian Ocean.

A giant red circle was drawn there.

“And it all has to happen when a new Object is headed our way.”

Part 2

Quenser and Heivia still had not been ordered back to the rest of the battalion.

That meant some kind of trouble was going to rise to the surface before long.

“This is what you call the Lost Angels way, Putana,” said Quenser as he grabbed one of the plastic shopping baskets stacked up at the supermarket entrance. “If we wanted to, we could have the Legitimacy Kingdom fleet send us more weapons and ammunition, but if we caused any trouble with those, we’d be announcing to the world that we’re from the Legitimacy Kingdom. When we don’t know what’s going to happen or where, it’s apparently best to keep a supply of handmade explosives to erase any clues we might leave behind.”

“I see. I don’t know much about explosives, but are they that easy to make, teacher?”

Heivia was not with them.

It seemed to be the way of the world to send that jack-of-all-trades out on odd jobs.

“Plastic explosives shouldn’t be that difficult. Basically, you just have to mix a stretchy rubber adhesive in with the explosive. The problem is the fuse.”

Quenser passed right by the perishables and moved to the spice

corner.

“A fuse is needed to detonate a plastic explosive. It’s a delicate explosive, so static electricity can easily set it off. If an amateur carelessly mixes it all together with a juicer or mixer, they can blow their own face off. Switching the device on can be a fatal mistake.”

“Is it that difficult?”

“The ingredients are easy to get your hands on. You have to be careful mixing them together, but the main ingredient is this right here.”

Quenser grabbed a heavy bag from the shelf and tossed it into the basket.

“Sugar. Those disarmament treaties are completely useless.”

He grabbed a few more ingredients and the two of them made their way to the register.

After leaving the supermarket, Putana used a handgun to drive off some delinquents messing with the (stolen) motorcycle she and Quenser had been using.

“Oh, did Millia give you that as proof of her trust?”

They heard a siren from somewhere nearby, but it had nothing to do with them. If every attempted theft was reported, the police would never get anything done. It seemed something had happened at another store.

A **Female Police Officer** could be seen slipping out the back entrance.

“That’s just a costume,” said Putana.

“What?”

“She’s either the criminal or her job is to sneak into the scene of the crime and nab some evidence. She’s something like us.”

“Ugh… I was thinking her hips were a little too sexy for a public servant.”

“More importantly, teacher.”

“What is it now, Putana?”

“Why are we wearing swimsuits?”

“I’d be too scared to mix together an explosive in that run-down motel. I asked Millia and she told me to use a car repair workshop on the beach. But the best way to get the ingredients there is to hide them in a cooler and only fishers or beachgoers would be carrying a cooler around.”

“Then why not dress as fishers?”

“A young guy and girl? Going to the sunny beach to do nothing but fish!? If anyone thought that was realistic, they’d have to be pretty damn bookish!”

Putana had to hide her handgun on her person, so she wore a light jacket over her green bikini.

At any rate, Quenser stuffed the contents of the shopping bags into the cooler and placed the cooler’s strap over his shoulder. As always, Putana climbed on the motorcycle and he pressed up against her back.

They rode the motorcycle to the southeastern beach.

Quenser was used to riding without a helmet by now and he spoke to Putana while glancing over at the roadside restaurants.

“What do you want for lunch?”

“I feel like a spinach saag curry. It goes better with saffron rice than naan and if you add some melted margarine to the rice for flavor…”

“We had curry yesterday!”

“That was keema curry,” casually replied Putana while driving along a seaside road. “It’s completely different.”

Lost Angels was in top form as always. A quick glance around showed men with stockings over their heads running out of a bank.

“Ahh, ahh. They make it too obvious. That fat one’s the **Jeweler** who lost everything, isn’t it? He’s really hit rock bottom.”

“But, teacher, there’s a **Worker** up on that telephone pole.”

“Oh, I’ve seen him around, but I guess he’s in charge of cutting the power and camera lines.”

Nothing in that scene showed the slightest hint of interest in the World Clock or mankind’s lifespan. Of course, that made sense when they had no guarantee of their survival three minutes into the future.

They drove along a land bridge crossing a subway line running parallel to the road and finally reached the car repair workshop. The building looked like a collection of concrete and sheet metal. Putana drove the motorcycle inside after they opened the garage shutter.

A muscular man in a tank top and work pants awaited them.

“Millia’s already paid me and explained the situation. You can use whatever you want in here, but if you destroy anything, it’ll cost you extra.”

“Understood.”

“Should I run some random machinery to make a bunch of noise?”

“Our work isn’t that noisy. We’ll be quietly mixing some ingredients like someone enjoying some classical music, so you can keep the place quiet.”

Hearing that, the repair workshop workers all left.

Quenser climbed down from the motorcycle and spread the cooler’s contents out on a random work bench.

He put on some special static-resistant gloves and used cups and scales to measure out the ingredients he placed in a mortar. He then carefully mixed them together.

Putana seemed to not have anything to do.

“Teacher.”

“If you’re feeling a sneeze coming on, hold it in. If I drop this on the floor, we’ll be blown to pieces.”

“That’s perfect. How about we have an important talk?”

He heard a metallic sound.

Putana Highball stood right in front of him and she was aiming a handgun at his chest from three meters away.

It was close range but still too far to reach out and grab the weapon.

Also, his hands were full of a delicate explosive mixture.

“Hey, Putana… This is a joke, right?”

“I was waiting for this moment,” she answered in a monotone voice.

When he heard that, an unpleasant sweat finally started pouring from Quenser’s entire body.

“Wait. Wait, Putana! There’s no place for you in the Faith Organization anymore! If you want the Legitimacy Kingdom to protect you, then you can’t do this!”

“That doesn’t matter!!”

Quenser stiffened at her explosive shout.

The mortar in his hands shook a bit.

“Do you even understand? That Object being stripped bare on the ocean is my Sarasvati!! That was a part of me! It was my life! And it is being dismantled on my own advice! Do you have any idea how humiliating that is!?”

Quenser had trouble breathing.

He looked up to heaven and confirmed that the bastard known as god was not going to help out a liar like him. Only then did he open his mouth again.

“Shooting me won’t bring the Collective Farming back.”

“I already told you. That doesn’t matter. My Sarasvati is being tormented without even being allowed to die and the cause of it all is standing right in front of me. What’s wrong with wanting to at least take his head as an offering?”

Putana’s hand trembled as it held the gun.

It may have been more than just anger. She may not have actually

decided where she would go or what she would do after shooting Quenser.

“I had my life taken from me. Even if I’m going to come to an agreement with the Legitimacy Kingdom, I have to settle this first.”

“…”

“If I kill you, I might be punished for it. But I’m a former Elite and I have plenty of classified Faith Organization information, while you’re just a student. Isn’t it obvious which one the Legitimacy Kingdom will choose? …Even if I kill you, I can work out an agreement, so I’m going to do it.”

“You don’t actually believe that, do you? If so, you would have pulled out your gun in the motel. Whatever you might say, you felt deep down that it would be too dangerous to act when you weren’t away from our home base.”

“Then what about you? Can you give me a single reason why I shouldn’t kill you?”

She was serious. It was not clear if her plans were as solid as she believed they were, but she was at least prepared to pull the trigger.

Once he realized that, the puny student named Quenser cast aside his own hesitation.

He threw the highly flammable mortar to the ground.

The bursting sound was much louder than a firecracker and whitish smoke filled the entire room.

“!?”

Putana flinched back and the ringing in her ears kept her from hearing the footsteps.

But even through the smokescreen she accurately sensed the gaze leaving her.

“Teacher!! Dammit!!”

With her gun in hand, she frantically ran forward through the white smoke, but Quenser was nowhere to be found in the repair workshop. He must have run outside.

Fortunately, he would be on foot while she had her motorcycle. But when she looked over, she found a screwdriver stabbed into the off-road motorcycle's back tire.

(He sure is thorough!!)

She clicked her tongue and slipped outside through the shutter.

She saw some distinctive footprints in the fine sand of the beach next to the asphalt road. They had been made by the sandals Quenser was wearing.

She ran around the repair workshop searching for him.

She found someone in the gap between two buildings, but it was not Quenser. They looked like a **Woman in a Dress**, but then they tossed aside a long-haired wig. Based on the long case for a pool set leaning against the wall nearby, he(?) was probably a **Sniper**.

Putana crossed the land bridge.

She heard the clattering of a train on the subway below.

(Strange. He can't drive a car or a motorcycle. He shouldn't be able to run that far on foot, so where did he go?)

"Putana!!"

She heard a sudden shout from behind.

She turned quickly around and saw her target had jumped down below the land bridge. Or more accurately, he had jumped onto the roof of the train.

He placed his hands around his mouth like a megaphone and shouted to her.

"There's a lot I want to talk about, but it'll have to wait until we're back in the usual room!!"

"Why you…!!"

By the time she climbed up onto the guardrail and tried to aim her handgun down, gazes of intense anger surrounded her.

Her caution shifted her attention from her target to her surroundings. The car repair workshop's workers were surrounding

the swimsuit girl.

The muscular man in a tank top spoke in a deep voice.

“I told you up front that destroying the equipment would cost extra, didn’t I? Let’s have a chat back in the office.”

Quenser had planned it all.

Putana Highball stuck the handgun back in her jacket’s pocket, clicked her tongue quietly, and still gave a wordless scream to release her excess anger.

Part 3

Real_Time_Log.

Network_System_From_“Shuttle_NATARAJA”.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“The Legitimacy Kingdom was supposed to leave sooner than this, weren’t they?”

“That’s why it wasn’t supposed to be like this. They were supposed to retreat after the Sarasvati’s maintenance was complete or, in the worst case, after the Garuda destroyed their Object.”

“If our plans have been thrown off, we have to find a way to compensate.”

“Yes. We must eliminate any possibility of the Nataraja being discovered.”

“Let’s send out the other one. This time, we will drive the Legitimacy Kingdom away from the ocean.”

“Will that end it?”

“It will.”

“Then…”

“We will complete our escape from earth without delay. Our eternal journey in search of paradise will finally begin.”

Part 4

“Now that we’ve gotten thoroughly sick of chicken burgers and lassi, the higher ups have given us some orders to kill some time. … Hm? What’s with this tense atmosphere?”

Quenser answered Millia with some bitter laughter.

Putana was standing next to him in her swimsuit and jacket and she glared at him so intensely he was afraid she was going to snap his neck right there.

Heivia had been working on other things, so he looked over at them in confusion.

“What’s this, Quenser? Did you push a little too forcibly for some premarital fun?”

“Of course not. It’s just that being a popular guy isn’t easy. We’ve gotten a lot closer since that last incident and she just can’t keep her smoldering gaze off of me☆”

He heard the brown girl loudly grinding her back teeth.

However, she seemed to still have enough sense to not pull her gun out in the middle of the run-down motel room.

The fact that she had waited until they were in the repair workshop to attack was proof that she did not want to start a fight here.

“A Faith Organization Second Generation Object is crossing the Indian Ocean toward Lost Angels. Our codename for it is Oriental Magic. It’s a formidable foe with an air cushion and a laser beam main cannon.”

“What about it? It isn’t going to head onto land and directly attack the city, is it?”

Their commander in a bikini top and baggy cargo pants

unconcernedly nodded in agreement with Heivia's comment.

"This city is a Faith Organization military port, so it isn't unusual for their Objects to show up. However, our Legitimacy Kingdom fleet and the Baby Magnum are currently out at sea. Do you really think they would risk drawing our fire just to load up on supplies here? Yes, that would mean bringing an empty Object in need of supplies to the front line."

"So it's here for some other reason?"

For example, it could want to drive the Legitimacy Kingdom away from Lost Angels's ocean entrance.

For example, it could want to take back or sink the captured Collective Farming that was being dismantled out at sea.

For example, it could want to quickly finish off Pilot Elite Putana Highball who had vanished with plenty of military secrets.

"Major Capistrano has reached the same conclusion and she wants some information to help confirm her suspicions. But don't get too worried. There are others gathering information, too. We just have to do what we can. Searching through it all is their job."

"What exactly are we going to do?"

"That's the perfect question, Quenser. Of the information we have, there's one thing we never managed to follow up on: the term Nataraja."

Putana had run across that information.

It had been in the cellphone memory of one of the perpetrators behind the talent trafficking (or an incident closely resembling that) disguised as an accidental hit on the cable cars.

"It's unknown if this has anything to do with the Oriental Magic on its way here, but it can't hurt to have more information. If what we're actually looking for lies elsewhere, one of the other groups will find it, so we need to focus on this. And with that said…"

Millia Newburg grabbed the projector's remote and the ceiling filled with white light.

"We want to investigate the Nataraja, but most of those connected

to it are dead or missing. We don't have any other clues. That's why I think we should start with him."

A map of Lost Angels appeared on the ceiling and a complex winding route was marked on it. The red line ran from the southern Great Fence to the international airport.

"Mulqueen Sonora. He's a ten-year-old boy with a PhD from California Biochemistry University. He's the child Putana rescued and handed over to the unit guarding the Faith Organization base. The unit is known as the Clovers or the white collars."

The brown girl's eyebrows moved slightly, but Millia continued regardless.

"He's the closest hint we have, but we can't question him with the Faith Organization in the way. Fortunately, little Sonora is set to be transported to the airport and flown back to his safe country. That means we can get our hands on this information source if we attack his escort team."

Heavy sounds came from behind Quenser and the others. The members of the intelligence division who had trouble hiding were known as the assault team and they were getting ready as they listened. They supplied firepower. They lived in a world where the names of armored cars and buildings they had blown up were exchanged instead of business cards.

"I have a question." Quenser raised a hand. "I assume this will mean knocking the car over and dragging the boy out of it, but isn't that pretty risky? To be honest, the odds of Mulqueen Sonora dying from the impact of the car rolling over are probably more than 50/50."

"Do you have another suggestion?"

"The people staying in them may be gone, but why not check the hotel rooms? We might be able to find some information left behind in phones, computers, or journals."

"The children who disappeared were geniuses from the Capitalist Corporations. Plus, the hotel they stayed in was owned by people they had some influence over. It was the Hotel Grand Jackpot, the biggest casino in the city. That's Mustard Cowboy's fortress, so if those of us from Azul Hive charged in there, we'd be starting a gang war. That sounds a lot more dangerous to me. We could even get a

ton of sightseers caught up in it all."

"…"

"Now you get it. We'll split into two groups for the attack. One to make the attack as planned and the other to cut off their escape if things go awry. After you all secure your own transportation, go to the marked spot on your map and remain on standby. That's all."

Several sets of footsteps filled the room.

Quenser looked around amid them, but his awful friend Heivia was already leaving the room with Millia. Heivia was joining the assault team for the mission to abduct Mulqueen, so there was no way to speak with him without their commanding officer knowing.

(Fine, then!!)

He switched his thoughts over to Plan B and grabbed Putana's arm in the parking lot out front.

"Putana, help me out here!"

"…What?"

Her voice was low as she replied, but he practically embraced her so he could speak with her in private.

"You saved Mulqueen Sonora, so you don't want him to die by your hand, do you? Let's do something about that. If we can acquire and hand over the necessary information before the assault team attacks the escort team, we can eliminate the entire justification for this attack mission. We can settle this without letting that boy die."

"What exactly are you suggesting?"

"The Hotel Grand Jackpot. I'm going to sneak into that source of dirty money for Mustard Cowboy…for the Capitalist Corporations soldiers. What about you, Putana? Will you join me?"

"Fine. But…"

"?"

Before he could wonder what she meant, a heavy shock ran through his stomach.

He doubled over, his feet were swept out from under him, and he was slammed to the scorching asphalt.

As he struggled to breathe, Putana Highball crouched down near him, pulled out her handgun, and pressed it to the center of his forehead.

She then whispered to him in her monotone voice.

“This doesn’t mean I have forgiven you.”

“Cough, cough! I-I don’t care if you just think I’m useful. The first step is getting a means of transportation.”

Part 5

This time, they were in a sky blue convertible.

In what had become the usual course of events, Putana was driving and Quenser was the baggage in the passenger seat. The engine was a little loud, but it was a comfortable ride. Quenser messed with the radio and found a pirate broadcast announcing the current odds for the black market gambling.

Putana spoke up as they passed a large tour bus full of what looked like **School Trip Students**.

“That’s a PMC camouflaged as tourists. That does seem like something the Capitalist Corporations would do.”

“You’re kidding… Can you tell because they’ve been marked like how dogs go around peeing on stuff?”

Their goal as they raced through Lost Angels was not the expected attack point that Millia had given them. They were on their way to the Mustard Cowboy-run Hotel Grand Jackpot, a five star luxury hotel with the city’s largest casino.

Based on what Millia had said while bored during late night work, more money changed hands there than anywhere else in the city, but that was not due to the gambling. Basically, it was a luxury

gathering spot for gang leaders to talk things out, make deals, resolve problems, and make connections. Paying bribes and depositing money in an underground bank were illegal activities, but nothing could be done if large sums of money moved from Person A to Person B in a bet at a legit casino. If they controlled who won the games of poker using code words in their conversations, the casino could be used for money laundering and deposits. To the Capitalist Corporations, the Legitimacy Kingdom was behind the times by nervously opening attaché cases in the harbor at night. Of course, that was according to the group that had failed to get their hands on that harbor.

That was just how dangerous a place the hotel was.

It would be absolutely filled with guns.

“Teacher, we’re disobeying orders, aren’t we?”

“If we pull it off, it’ll all cancel out in the end.”

“Is that the Lost Angels way of doing things?”

“No, it’s more like a summary of my entire life.”

The Hotel Grand Jackpot was in the western financial district. The district seemed filled with mirror-paneled intelligent buildings, but walls here and there were covered in yellow graffiti. That was the team color of Mustard Cowboy.

“Where do we go in?”

“The front entrance. It’s the city’s biggest casino and a luxury hotel, but it also has a restaurant and gym open to the public. It’s easier to get in as a customer than trying to sneak in.”

They were using a stolen car, so they could not leave the convertible with the valet driver at the entrance. They abandoned it in the street in front of the hotel and walked right in the main entrance.

The lobby was no different from any other hotel’s. There was the usual row of counters and a lounge selling coffee that was likely quite expensive. There were no gaudy bunny girls walking around shaking their butts. The money-making casino probably did not really begin until one took the escalator down to the casino section.

“This place really is run by the Capitalist Corporations,” said Putana. “The atmosphere is entirely different.”

“Is it?”

“Just to be clear, we’re from Azul Hive and they’re with Mustard Cowboy. If they decide to solve this problem as a gang rather than as the military, we won’t be protected by any treaties related to prisoners of war.”

“Wait a second, Putana. It’s that guy.”

Quenser spotted someone dangerous, but he did not jump behind a column. That would only draw more attention. He could not remember if the man’s name was John or George, but it was the former Mustard Cowboy leader they had abducted before.

The bearded man was muttering to himself as he crossed the lobby with several men in the kinds of suits stock brokers would wear.

“Honestly, I made sure to get that fake ID and handgun and here I am. I decided to steal the printing plates for the dollars or euros they rely on and taking over their business, so why am I here helping out some commoner nun?”

“Sigh. I get the feeling you could die a dozen times and it wouldn’t fix your weak mind and lack of planning. It would probably take one death per flaw.”

“Yeah? Then why are you working with me?”

The gang members passed by while speaking back and forth.

Fortunately, they did not seem to notice Quenser and Putana. They seemed to be headed toward the escalator to the casino rather than the elevators to the hotel rooms. Quenser and Putana started toward elevator hall by cutting across directly behind those gang members.

They boarded an elevator and Putana asked a question.

“We’re supposed to be searching the missing children’s rooms, but do you know what floor they were on?”

“Floor 38.”

“Based on what?”

“In a hotel for VIPs, the options are limited when you want to rent out an entire floor for a group. It has to be an unpopular floor. The elevators wait at the very top and very bottom, so it takes the longest for them to reach the floors in the middle. Now, Putana, how are the elevators laid out in this hotel?”

“Floors 1-5 are shared, but the rest is split between 6-25 and 26-50.”

“What matters is that these people were being welcomed as VIPs. That means the hotel couldn’t let them know they were being put on an unpopular floor. The hotel would put them on a higher floor to distract them with the wonderful night scenery.”

“Which means…”

“The center of the upper section. That means Floor 38.”

The elevator stopped on their destination floor and the door parted.

“Of course, that’s all something Millia told me when we were killing time.”

They entered the hall and found a long line of doors. The place had been rented out as a group, so any of the doors would lead to the rooms those genius boys and girls had stayed in.

“Even if they’re gone, I think the doors will be locked,” pointed out Putana.

“We’ll do this the Lost Angels way.”

“Blow off the doorknob with a shotgun?”

“We’ll be a little gentler than that.”

Quenser approached the icemaker, reached behind it, and pulled out the plug.

“Teacher?”

“Hey, Putana. This isn’t a military facility that stores important secrets. In case of unforeseen trouble, they’ll prioritize the safety of their guests and have all of the rooms unlock. For example…”

Quenser stuck his hand below the icemaker and grabbed some balls of dust.

He wrapped them around the power plug and stuck it back into the outlet.

This was the stereotypical cause of an electrical fire found in user's manuals.

"When a small fire sets off the fire alarm."

Heivia Winchell slowly stopped a garbage truck behind a narrow alley leading to Kiwi Street. The truck looked like a rectangular hunk of steel and he was making some attack preparations along with the assault team.

One might think stolen cars were all high-riding sports cars, but there was sometimes a demand for heavier vehicles like this. They were especially important when someone wanted to make sure they knocked their target off of the road, when someone wanted to make an assault amid gunfire, or when someone wanted to abandon them in the road to change their target's plans.

Millia Newburg sat in the passenger seat.

She was trying to suppress a grin and she had a simple reason.

"Quenser and Putana have vanished. Do you think they're refusing the mission?"

"Don't joke. If they refuse to submit or receive their paperwork and then they vanish, they'll be treated as deserters. Don't they know that?"

"Well, Quenser's a student and Putana's a POW. They might just barely squeak by if it comes to a serious court martial. Of course, we use corporal punishment here on the scene."

"If that's all it'll get them, maybe I should've run off with them."

"Ha ha. I'm sure they have some kind of plan."

Millia reached for some caffeinated gum of unknown ownership on the dashboard and tossed a piece into her mouth.

The bright sun poured onto the street three meters ahead of them and plenty of cars passed by, completely unaware of the attack Heivia and the others were planning. A convertible full of nearly-

nude women passed by and a **Pizza Deliveryman** drove cheerfully by on a scooter.

To distract himself from his tension, Heivia spoke to his commanding officer.

“Come to think of it, the pizza shop in front of the station has started a new fair, haven’t they?”

“I’m surprised seeing that guy makes you hungry. He’s a spy who goes around delivering bombs in between actually delivering pizzas.”

“…”

“Unfortunately, we sometimes use his services, so we can’t just fill him with lead.”

Whatever happened, it seemed Lost Angels would always be Lost Angels.

Heivia was fed up with it all and Millia began giving instructions to the other assault team members located elsewhere.

“Kiwi Street, we’re prepared for the attack. Report on their progress.”

“Blue 03, the package has turned from Orange Street to Lemon Street.”

“Blue 18, an identical model vehicle spotted on its way to Lemon Street. I believe it’s meant to confuse us.”

“Blue 29, we’re in position. Waiting for permission to cut the package’s line.”

If they were even slightly afraid of an attack, the escort team would not take the long, long highways forming a cross as they ran east to west and south to north through the city. They would turn again and again through the net-like layout of roads running through Lost Angels in an attempt to reduce the risk of an ambush.

Could an accurate and certain attack be made in that situation?

The answer was yes.

“You have permission. Cut the package’s line.”

Millia Newburg's tone was entirely casual.

Private matters were private matters and work was work. For that reason, this woman was willing to wield guns and set up bombs.

A high-pitched bell rang through the straight hallway.

Quenser and Putana ignored it as they grabbed the knob to a nearby room.

The knob turned without needing to check the electronic key.

Putana spoke after they slipped inside.

"Are you sure the fire won't spread and cut off our escape?"

"I sabotaged the icemaker. If the fire gets too strong, it'll melt the ice and get covered in tons of water. This isn't going to turn into a huge fire and kill a bunch of civilians."

Quenser looked around the room as he answered.

It seemed to be a single room because it had only one bed and the sofa by the side table was only large enough for one. There were no personal items scattered around. There was only a suitcase covered in stickers by the wall.

The suitcase was locked, but it was made of a thick synthetic fiber. He cut it open with the knife in his survival kit and checked on the contents.

"Clothes, a toothbrush, a guidebook, and…is this allergy medicine?"

"It doesn't look like there's a phone or computer. No camera or video games either."

"I don't see a journal or notebook either. It looks like they cleaned up everything before disappearing."

Quenser and Putana exchanged a glance.

"Come to think of it, that boy said the others had happily gone to the Star."

"Well, we need some information. If there was any digital data, it

had to be something they went out of their way to hide. If we check on it, it might give us an important hint."

"How do we do that?"

Quenser grabbed the TV remote and hit the "details" button instead of tuning to a specific station.

"They checked in three days before, asked to have their clothes washed, and were charged for an off-hours cleaning service. No room service or pay TV, huh? Ha ha. What a teacher's pet."

"How does this help?"

"Listen, they were here for three days. If they did have a computer, they would have used the internet. They would've gotten withdrawal symptoms otherwise."

Quenser checked the phone on the side table.

"It's an IP phone. Is that to cut down on the fees? If so, there has to be a router or modem… No, or does the phone double as one?"

"What are you going to do?"

"When working late at night, Heivia was downloading some adult video and the screen froze up. He froze up, too. He had me help him get it running again, the electronic simulation division got involved in exchange for the secret address Heivia had, and we got our hands on some pretty sophisticated file recovery software. I'm gonna run that on here."

"But this is a phone with a router, right? I doubt it has a hard disk like a computer does."

"Are you serious? Then how do you think the router's settings file gets updated?"

He used a cable to connect his military handheld device to the IP phone and a ton of letters and numbers filled the small screen in no time.

"See? Traces of all the data they looked at is still in the temporary files! I'm never gonna trust public internet again!!"

"You learned all of this from Millia, didn't you? Quit looking so proud of yourself. You're embarrassing yourself."

Before long, the letters and numbers had been converted to human-readable data.

The child must have passed the time surfing the internet because several URLs were apparent. It was all on topics that did not paint humanity in a positive light: environmental pollution, the negatives of clean wars, financial problems, racial discrimination, the estimated remaining amounts and consumption rates of various resources, and the World Clock.

“It looks like they visited SNSs and forums too. Looks like I can’t do much about that without the IDs and passwords used.”

“You’re looking at all that, you peeping tom?”

“Just to be clear, if we don’t get any useful information here, the car carrying Mulqueen Sonora will be attacked and he has more than a 50/50 chance of dying.”

He could not access the sites the child had accessed, but he could browse the data that was uploaded to them. There was quite a lot of it and the file was in a special format.

“What…is this? This is pretty specialized software used when drawing blueprints.”

“Meaning?”

“Don’t you find it odd? This is used to the store the data for Object designs.”

There was so much data that it took some time for the small handheld device to open the file. They could only wait for the “loading” bar to slowly fill up.

Finally, the data was displayed.

It was indeed a diagram.

But…

“What…the hell?”

Quenser was dumbfounded.

This was not an Object.

It was shaped like the mantas he had seen on a documentary.

But if the scale given was accurate, it was over ten thousand meters long.

Heivia waited in a garbage truck at the entrance to the alley off of Kiwi Street and he heard sirens in the distance.

The package's line had been cut.

What that code phrase meant was simple

Reports from the assault team continued.

"Blue 09, I've finished cutting the traffic light's cable."

"Blue 17, the water pipe has burst."

"Blue 34, the fake traffic accident has been set up at the corner of Lemon Street and Grape Square. Abandoning our vehicles and retreating."

Mulqueen Sonora's escort team would be most afraid of coming to a stop. Even if the windows were bulletproof and the tires were stuffed with sponge, a door could be forced open if they were surrounded and violently attacked.

That was why Heivia and the rest of Azul Hive were causing trouble around the city.

That would create traffic jams on the roads they wanted.

To avoid a situation where they could not move forward or back and were pretty much asking to be attacked, the escort team would definitely avoid any traffic jams. If the routes through the network of roads were limited, the chance of making an attack would go up.

Their enemies were experts too, so they would know someone was setting them up.

But they would have no choice but to go along with it.

“Blue 11, the package has moved from Lemon Street to Kiwi Street. Ten minutes until the expected point.”

“Understood, 11. Heivia, start the engine.”

“Blue 12, beginning action. Urging the package forward from behind.”

“Dammit. Are the deserters not going to pull off a miracle after all!?”

Heivia turned the key as he spat out those words.

Millia was looking a little worried, too.

“I’ll tell you when to go. You just have to push the accelerator down to the floor. We’ll slam into the first car from the side and bring the entire escort team to a stop. The rest of the assault team will attack the back car to keep them from backing up and we’ll help ourselves to the delicious toppings squished in the middle of the sandwich.”

It was a simple enough plan, but that was the ideal outcome.

A single mistake or unfortunate coincidence and it would all fall apart.

It may have changed form somewhat, but it was still a military action and that meant loss of life was possible.

Quenser and Putana looked at the unknown blueprints they had found in the hotel room. The mysterious machine was shaped like a ten thousand meter manta, which made it larger than an Object.

Notes were written at various points:

Anti-cosmic ray coating.

Ion engines.

Solar power panels.

Circulating environment.

2500 person capacity.

Low-temperature extreme environment preservation pods.

Seed and embryo freezing technology.

“The Star.”

Putana Highball seemed dumbfounded, but she somehow forced out a quiet voice.

“That boy mentioned that everyone went to the Star. If so, is this…?”

“An artificial planet.” Quenser gulped. “This is on an entirely different level from the rockets and shuttles of the past. This is a colossal spaceship with a proper living environment that’s meant to circle the sun like a needle on a record, just as Mars or Jupiter do. No, maybe the solar system is just for practice and they’re actually planning to join another star system. If they have cold sleep tech, they can ignore the time it takes to get there.”

Technically, a planet needed to rotate to have a stable orbit. With this, there would be a risk of slipping out of orbit, but it was possible it could make corrections with its various engines.

It mostly secured energy from sunlight, but it seemed it was also designed to terraform the satellites of other planets for various kinds of fuel and resources. There was even a report on growing potatoes and corn for biofuels. That was the basis of the Re Terra technology built into Putana’s Object.

“But is this even possible?” Putana looked dubious. “This giant ‘Star’ is ten kilometers long. Even if they did construct it, wouldn’t its own weight prevent it from escaping the earth’s gravity?”

“There’s a suggestion here about building it in satellite orbit, but I doubt that would work either. After all, it’s just too big. It would be torn up by all the debris up there before it was finished. Holes would be torn in the hull as soon as it was made and new holes would be made as soon as they patched up the old ones. Even if they did complete it, it would be too weak and it would break apart pretty quickly.”

“Then what is this?”

“I don’t know,” said Quenser. “But it looks the word Nataraja is definitely related to this artificial planet.”

The blueprints had completely unrelated thoughts written alongside the necessary information.

It was almost like someone had been doodling in the margin of their notebook while bored in class.

It said, the following:

Humanity will destroy itself in another three hundred years. If they want to die, that's fine by me, but I don't want to be dragged down with them.

It will all be over soon.

Once the Nataraja is complete, we can overcome even the worst Kali Yuga. We were chosen, so we will escape this earth and all its problems.

"Teacher, this might be a form of eschatology just like Armageddon."

"Eschatology?"

"Kali Yuga is the age when the teachings of the gods have been lost and it refers to modern times. When it ends, all of human civilization is destroyed and Nataraja…that is, Lord Shiva burns it all away to make a brand new world."

It was not clear what all that referred to in reality, but looking at the plans for that giant "Star" was not going to help calm them down.

"Let's go over what we know." Quenser sat directly on the side table. "The missing geniuses are fed up with modern society and all of its problems. If possible, they want to leave the earth in search of a new paradise."

"And the result is this Star?"

"They used their fields of research to help construct this giant artificial planet. They may have received passports to the new world in return. The cable car incident was not talent trafficking. It wasn't a kidnapping. It was an act for the children to disappear."

"It's true clever weapons developers wouldn't be allowed to leave or defect so easily."

"And based on what I've heard from Frolaytia and Millia, these geniuses are turning up missing in safe countries all over the world, so it isn't just the cable car incident. The plans for the artificial planet said it can hold 2500 people. In the worst case, they might have that many geniuses working with them."

"In other words, this problem goes beyond Lost Angels."

"They might have built a secret network spanning all four world

powers. And it would have to slip past the surveillance to connect the geniuses surrounded by the military and research facilities."

This was a plan to put a great number of geniuses in cold sleep and send them outside the solar system.

But could the artificial planet realistically escape earth's gravity after growing so large?

And how was this related to the Oriental Magic approaching the Indian Ocean?

At that moment, the fire alarm suddenly stopped ringing.

Putana looked up in surprise and glared at the door.

"I sense eight gazes filled with killer intent… They're coming this way!"

"Is this as far as we get!?"

Quenser yanked out the handheld device's cable.

He continued operating the device while looking at the small screen, so Putana spoke up in annoyance.

"What are you doing!?"

"A lot of the data couldn't be converted to text, so I'm having the program decrypt the rest. How much it can do with one click is up to the electronic simulation department's secret weapon, though!"

After finishing the necessary process, he shoved the device in his pocket and asked a question of his own.

"Putana, you have a gun, right? Head to the emergency staircase. They should have an emergency escape tube there. Use that."

"What about you?"

"I'd like to fight too, but a certain someone kept me from making my fuses. Can you take responsibility for that?"

She clicked her tongue and made her way to the room's door.

She fired a few times before turning the knob and kicked the hole-filled door into the hallway.

She ignored the collapsed thug spraying blood everywhere with a submachinegun in his arms and she fired further down the hallway.

“Let’s go, teacher!”

“We can’t use the elevator. Get to the emergency stairs!”

The Hotel Grand Jackpot was Mustard Cowboy’s (and therefore the Capitalist Corporations’) home. They would keep sending in reinforcements during a long, drawn-out battle, so they would eventually overrun Putana with pure numbers.

That was why she sprayed bullets to make them flinch back rather than trying to kill them all.

The two of them ran down the hallway while the enemy could not move.

The emergency staircase was attached to the outside of the building. It looked bad and there was a risk of drunks jumping off of it, but if the emergency stairs were inside the building, they would become a giant chimney during a fire and there was a danger of everyone using them dying of carbon monoxide poisoning. They were on the outside to prevent that.

Quenser jumped down to the landing and removed the latch on a metal box.

He pulled out a seventy centimeter wide tube made of synthetic fibers. He attached the end to the stairway railing and threw the rest of it over the edge.

“Putana, hurry up!”

“We’ll stand out too much if we go down in that!! They’ll be waiting for us at the bottom and it will take over three minutes until we reach the ground, so if they unhook the top partway through, we’ll be in a freefall!!”

“That doesn’t matter! Hurry over here!!”

An unpleasant sweat was collecting on Heivia’s hands as he held the garbage truck’s steering wheel.

Millia must have been used to this sort of situation because she

looked nervous but not worried.

The rest of the assault team was giving reports over the radio.

“Blue 12, the package is still on its way down Kiwi Street. There are no unrelated cars in between us anymore.”

“Blue 20, I will keep any unrelated cars from getting in.”

“Blue 15, 12 was hit. Continuing action.”

“Blue 07, finished picking up 12. Withdrawing. Good luck.”

“Here they come,” said Millia. “At worst, you can miss the first car. Just make sure you hit the escort team and stop them in the middle of the road. That will leave the package at a standstill.”

“…”

“Calm down, boy. Don’t be so afraid of messing up that you make yourself mess up.”

“If I mess up here, a civilian will die! And a ten-year-old kid at that! I’m confident I can pull this off, but a human life is resting on my shoulders!! Of course I’m going to be breathing a little heavily!!”

“If you don’t like worrying, then try not to think about anything that isn’t absolutely necessary. Tuning your brain is a standard technique for a soldier.”

The time approached.

Heivia clenched his teeth and squeezed his hands around the steering wheel.

They looked like thugs in flashy suits, but they were actually spies from the Capitalist Corporations. They had gathered on the landing of the hotel’s emergency staircase.

They heard scraping cloth coming from the opening to the emergency escape tube.

Someone was sliding down it.

One of the men removed the safety device on the railing and threw

it out into the air.

As there was a weight partway down, the synthetic fabric fell straight down to the asphalt without the wind carrying it.

A soft thud rang out and they contacted the team on the surface via radio.

“We’ve eliminated the intruder. Just to be sure, check the body on the surface.”

“Blue 15, beginning countdown at 100.”

“Heivia, the package is less than five kilometers away. They’re closing in at twenty-five meters a second. Are you ready!?”

“Dammit!! I’ll do it! I just have to do it, right!?”

Quenser and Putana were hiding in a room one floor down whose lock had also been released.

“Won’t they figure out pretty quickly you only dropped a fire extinguisher down?”

“It doesn’t matter if they figure out the trick. We just have to make sure we’re long gone by then.”

They had put on the clothes they found in the closet and generally changed their hairstyles in front of the mirror. Quenser was wearing a white suit and Putana was wearing a dress with a miniskirt so short her butt was just about visible. The poor taste made it obvious what kind of guests had been staying in this room.

They slowly left the room.

The elevators had recovered, so they boarded one and made their way to the first floor.

The glass-covered elevator shaft gave them a view of some thugs riding another elevator straight up, but it was too late.

“Okay, we need to report this. We’ll spoil the others’ fun with our information on the artificial planet.”

"…"

Putana's eyes sharpened. She may have been planning to put a bullet in Quenser's forehead as soon as she was certain Mulqueen Sonora was safe.

However…

"Millia? Millia! What's going on!?"

"Can you not get through?"

"It's not just that the radio isn't reaching. There's more to this."

The quick elevator reached the first floor entrance.

As some thugs rushed to the landing site of the outdoor emergency escape tube, Quenser and Putana hurried out the main entrance. They could tell Mustard Cowboy was as confused as they were. The men were looking down at their cellphones and radios and repeatedly messing with the settings.

Whether he had been successful or not, the bearded former leader they had seen before was walking on the road out front.

"See? I told you the printing plates for the money were in that fortress of a casino! Of course, that fire alarm did kind of save our asses!"

"That's our boss. I'll follow you to the ends of the earth."

"I've got that nun to take care of, so let's scram."

Right in front of Quenser and Putana's eyes, they hopped into the sky blue convertible parked on the curb and started the engine.

"That's our car!"

"Wait, teacher. We don't want a firefight here."

They checked their surroundings while leaving the hotel on foot and spotted a **Hot Dog Stand** van parked on the curb. It must have been overhauled in a hurry recently because the frame was clearly quite old and falling apart. The man in the driver's seat was raising his middle finger toward the blue sky.

(Huh? Isn't that the guy who steals device data over Wi-Fi?)

Quenser checked where the man was looking.

“There we go.”

“?”

“There’s a UAV flying through the northern sky. That thing is jamming us!”

“But that’s a high-grade RC. If it was using an ECM, wouldn’t it lose control, too?”

“Not if it’s using lasers to communicate or if it’s autonomously controlled by a program. Also, that attack in the hotel was strange. Someone may have sent an email to the guards to get it started.”

“Someone related to the Star?”

“I can’t think of anyone else who would be worried about information on the Nataraja getting out.”

Regardless, if they did not get the information to Millia Newburg, the others would continue as planned and attack Mulqueen Sonora. No matter how perfectly they prepared, they could not guarantee the safety of that mission.

“It isn’t armed, so this is pure electronic warfare. …Putana, can you shoot it down?”

“Don’t joke. This is a 9mm automatic.”

“Then we’ll have to find some other way.”

Quenser looked around and ran out into the road.

The sound of screeching brakes filled the sunny city.

“Putana, the driver’s seat!!”

She shoved her gun forward as told. A man in his early twenties was visible on the other side of the windshield. He went pale, let go of the steering wheel, and raised his hands. Luckily, he was not the type to take a gamble on accelerating to knock them out of the way.

Quenser forced open the driver’s side door and grabbed the young man’s collar.

“Sorry, but you’ll be helping us.”

“W-with what?”

“I know this **Ice Cream Truck** sends out a pirate broadcast.”

Quenser looked to the windowless metal box on the back of the truck.

The young man’s face was soaked with sweat.

“Ha…ha ha. What on earth are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb. You were spreading half-truths during that cable car incident, so how about I throw you out in front of the Baby Magnum? If you’re really an innocent civilian, the Princess won’t crush your truck. But if you’re guilty and an expert soldier, she won’t see any reason not to kill you as an enemy combatant.”

“Heh…eh heh…eh heh heh. Wh-what would you like?”

“There are two ways of breaking through radio jamming: choosing a bandwidth not blocked or breaking through with an even more powerful signal. You can handle that, can’t you?”

Even back in the alley, they could faintly hear the target’s engines. The assault team was keeping them moving from behind, so their tires were screeching in their hurry.

Heivia would slam his garbage truck in at a right angle to cut them off.

That would end it.

If successful, they would get valuable information. If they failed, they would turn an innocent ten-year-old boy to mincemeat.

Was this really worth the risk?

Was this information worth betting a human life like a chip on the poker table?

“…”

Heivia slowly breathed in and then exhaled.

“10, 9, 8…”

The countdown continued.

It felt like grains of sand falling down the disturbing hourglass that measured someone’s remaining life.

His eyes had fallen to the steering wheel, so he looked back up. He stared at Kiwi Street up ahead.

His left foot held the clutch halfway down, he removed his right foot from the brake pedal, and the sole of that foot stroked the surface of the gas pedal.

He prepared to slam that foot down.

But just before he did…

“Kssshhh!! This is Blue -1! We have acquired the information from the Hotel Grand Jackpot! I repeat, we have acquired the information from the Hotel Grand Jackpot! Ksshh. You’ll probably only get this same information if you attack the escort team!! I recommend a change of plans!! Ksshh!!”

A strange wrinkle came over Heivia’s brow.

(That idiot has to contact us now of all times!?)

He was not sure what to do. Their cooperation had been thrown off and that kind of minor thing could lead to accidentally killing Mulqueen Sonora.

He frantically glanced over at Millia, but she remained silent.

The engine sounds of the escort team had almost arrived.

“5, 4, 3…”

The countdown continued.

Heivia clicked his tongue and stepped on the gas pedal. The garbage truck finally began to move. If he lifted his left foot, the clutch would fully connect and the truck would burst forward into Kiwi Street. It would crash into the lead car from the side and the bulletproof cars carrying the ten-year-old child would crash into it from behind one after another.

"…2, 1…"

He heard a dull sound as Millia Newburg bit her lip and shouted into the radio.

"Abort mission!!"

Heivia and the others watched the group of black cars drive past.

Heivia pressed down the clutch at the very last second. The truck engine roared fruitlessly and it moved no further forward.

In that instant, his eyes briefly met with those of the boy innocently pressing his hands against the window to peer out at the scenery.

Before they could begin to make an emotional connection, it all vanished into the flowing scenery.

Still, guilt very nearly broke the dams holding back Heivia's tears.

Finally, the rest of the assault team contacted them.

"Blue 15, change of orders confirmed. Breaking away from behind the escort team."

"Blue 07, awaiting permission to support 15."

"Blue 15, this is only my personal opinion, but this is a weight off my shoulders. Thank you."

Millia switched off the radio without saying anything back.

She leaned forward, scraped her forehead on the dashboard, and slowly sighed.

She seemed stunned at her own actions and spoke in a self-deprecating tone.

"It is for me, too."

Part 6

Real_Time_Log.

Network_System_From_“Shuttle_NATARAJA”.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“You’ve said that countless times already.”

“They were supposed to be taken out in the Capitalist Corporations’ home base, but they escaped safely and forced through the UAV’s ECM. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. If information on the Nataraja is brought back to the Legitimacy Kingdom, knowledge of its existence will spread.”

“That doesn’t matter if they don’t know its exact location.”

“You don’t mean…? No, that’s too dangerous.”

“Either way, we have already sent the Second Generation Kali there. You should have been prepared for this.”

“But it wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“We will move the Nataraja.”

“If we move it now, we’ll be announcing its presence to the world. It’s too dangerous.”

“This is the only option left for the Star now. Or should I say, for the future of those exposed to the Fourth Age of Kali Yuga?”

Part 7

Quenser wiped some unpleasant sweat from his brow inside the **Ice Cream Truck**’s kitchen portion (that was mostly used to cool the large communications equipment).

He gave a quiet sigh.

“It seems the attack on Mulqueen Sonora was aborted. We just barely got by on that one. Now, Putana, how about we go punch Millia and the others?”

“Teacher, why didn’t you tell me you were feeling suicidal? I have a 9mm automatic right here, so you only had to let me know.”

“Ah, eh? That’s still going on? Really!? Please no! And there’s nowhere to run in this small truck!!”

Quenser leaned hard against the wall while bursting into tears. Thinking it was some kind of gag, Putana watched coldly, but the situation suddenly changed.

The wall rotated around like in an Island Nation ninja mansion.

To save space, the counter for exchanging money and ice cream was made to fold up into the side wall while driving. Quenser had leaned against it as a shortcut outside.

Putana pulled her handgun from the pocket of her far-too-short dress and clicked her tongue.

“Teacher!! Oh, damn. Where did you get off to!? And this was the perfect chance to put a bullet between your eyes!!”

She quickly climbed out over the counter and set out on a journey to search for the boy.

Meanwhile, Quenser quietly sighed from below the truck.

“I really thought I was a goner there.”

When he crawled out, the ice cream truck’s private TV broadcaster spoke to him.

“C-can I go now? You aren’t going to ask me to help you transmit classified data, are you?”

“Sure, sure. You can go. I’d like to send the data on the Nataraja, but I’d be afraid the temporary files would stick around in your devices. I’ll hand deliver this.”

“Ha…ha ha. I see.”

“Oh, but one thing. You sell ice cream for camouflage, right? If I pay, could I get some chocolate chip mint?”

The battlefield student finally left the truck with some bright green ice cream.

He thought to himself while enjoying the cold sweetness.

Putana was gone, but the Capitalist Corporations’ Mustard Cowboy

had a lot of influence in this western region. Plus, they had just caused some trouble in the Hotel Grand Jackpot. Even without that, she was being constantly pursued by the Faith Organization's Viridian Edge. If she wanted to guarantee her safety, she would leave the western region and regroup with the Legitimacy Kingdom's Azul Hive.

(That means we'll meet back up in the usual motel. The communication situation is still awful, so I can't contact Heivia, Millia, or the others either.)

He looked up into the blue sky.

The electronic warfare UAV was still flying high above, but luckily, it had no weapons. Still, he did not want to be stalked from the air and have troops sent in based on the aerial photographs. He looked around, crunched through the cone holding the ice cream, found the stairs down to a subway station, and ran down.

Lost Angels's subway was about the worst possible ride and was only recommended for "indebted men who want to commit suicide or women who want to be impregnated ASAP", but he had no choice here.

Quenser felt a little dejected when he saw the great variety of clientele: a mohawked man with a strong odor of paint coming from the mouth, a depressed-looking office worker with a full suit on his upper body and only briefs on his lower body, and a young wife smiling happily as she pushed around a stroller that for some reason carried a battered piece of driftwood. Regardless, Quenser let the train rock him back and forth as he made his way to his destination as quickly as possible.

To escape reality, he turned his eyes toward the LCD advertisement installed above the automatic door, but then his face clouded over.

It only displayed a simple text headline: Another clash between the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization? A battle between Objects has been confirmed in the Indian Ocean off of Lost Angels.

"…"

(The Legitimacy Kingdom in an Object battle on the Indian Ocean? Did that Second Generation called the Oriental Magic attack the Princess!?)

He would not find any more detailed information here.

Those with the information waited in the run-down motel.

Part 8

An invisible hell covered the blue ocean.

The Princess had not been killed because she sat inside the Baby Magnum which could take a direct hit from a nuclear weapon, but otherwise her eyeballs might have boiled and her entire body might have been cooked away.

She glared at the source through the cameras and sensors linked to the giant monitor.

It was the Faith Organization's Second Generation Object named the Oriental Magic.

It was about seven kilometers away. It hovered a bit above the ocean's surface using its air cushion propulsion device, its laser beam main cannon included a cylindrical excitation system larger than the cannon's barrel, and it also had a Gatling system containing several giant cannon barrels.

However, the Gatling system was not just a rotating machine cannon.

It made a sound like a broken buzzer as it scattered five meter spears around. They were never aimed at the Princess and they landed all across that area of ocean. They would then float with their long, narrow bodies sticking vertically from the water, just like a fishing bobber or a buoy.

More than eight thousand of them were fired every minute.

The spears covered the unobstructed ocean like a strange plantation. Whenever the wind or waves rocked the ocean surface, they would gently wave like ears of rice.

"Kssshhh!! Prin…cess….ksshh!! It happened…again! Ksshh….This exceeds…ksshh…the saturation level…ksshh!! Even for an

Object's…ksshh…anti-air lasers! It'll never end…if you focus on that!!"

"I know that!!"

The communication issues were not a problem with the Baby Magnum.

The Oriental Magic was emitting radar waves in every direction. They were sometimes strong and sometimes weak, but at their highest, they were powerful enough to roast all of the seabirds in the area.

Radar might sound like something special, but they used the same microwaves as a microwave oven.

They had heated the Baby Magnum's outer shell of onion armor to a faint orange and countless sparks were flying everywhere.

(That's a lot of power. If this thing approaches the maintenance fleet, everyone will be turned into human torches!!)

These specs seemed to completely ignore the optimal solution for radar.

It made the Princess suspect this was only disguised as radar because of the international criticism they would receive if it was registered on paper as an electromagnetic weapon meant to cook people alive.

That invisible hell was expanded around the Oriental Magic.

At thirty kilometers, there was a risk of it negatively affecting the human body. At ten kilometers, death was guaranteed and one's blood might even boil despite being inside a warship.

The Object was already on the edge of that first range.

The Princess had to settle this before that range of guaranteed death reached the Legitimacy Kingdom fleet.

"Kh!!"

She operated the seven main cannons and fired low-stability plasma cannons at the enemy in front of her.

But…

“I can’t hit it!! No matter how many times I try!!”

It was true the Oriental Magic was using her pre-fire movements to predict where she would fire and take evasive action, but even when the Princess predicted those evasive actions, her cannon blasts were not even scratching the other Object.

This was no longer an issue of the Pilot Elite’s skill.

There was a discrepancy between the ballistic path in her head and

the one the cannon blast actually took.

It was almost like…

“There’s a deviation in the ballistic calculations?” blankly muttered the Princess.

Meanwhile, the Oriental Magic continued forward with nothing blocking its way.

Surrounded by the massive field of deadly microwaves, it approached the fleet the Baby Magnum was meant to protect.

Part 9

By the time Quenser arrived at the run-down motel, the Legitimacy Kingdom's Azul Hive gang was just about ready to get moving.

It was no longer time to be punching anyone.

As a greeting, he was chased around by a stolen car and very nearly hit in the butt by the bumper.

"Wah! Wah!! Waaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?"

"Okay! Stop, Heivia! Now, Quenser, do you have anything to say to the nice woman who just had the driver stop only twenty centimeters away?"

Millia leaned out from the car's sunroof with a smile and Quenser answered her question while collapsed on the ground with tears and snot covering his face.

"E-e-eeeeeeeek!? I-I'm sorry… I won't ever disobey your orders again! I'm sorryyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

"That's some nice crying, but I don't buy it. …Say, that's an awfully nice smell coming from your mouth."

"Oh, that's because I ate some chocolate chip mint ice cream while I was out."

"Run him over, Heivia. What does that brat think he was doing while his commanding officer was stuck in a sour-smelling garbage truck?"

"Eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!?"

Having cleverly given up on her search and quickly returned to the motel, Putana sat in the back seat of the car and she raised her hand to give a suggestion.

"Millia, if you are going to execute him, leave it to me. I will give it my all."

“I feel like you really would kill him, so no. More importantly, get in, Quenser. Some excitement has reached the fleet out at sea, so we need to head out there and support them.”

“Eh? Um, what? What do you mean support them?”

He quickly opened the car’s back door and climbed inside.

Heivia answered from the driver’s seat.

“Sneaking around delivering presents like Santa Claus isn’t enough anymore. The fleet is in trouble, so they want a little help.”

Millia waved her hand in the passenger seat. Putana must have already told them what they had found, so he handed his handheld device to her.

He shared the artificial planet information with the others.

As usual, Quenser sat next to Putana. They looked friendly enough packed in next to each other, but he had no idea when she was going to shoot him at point blank range.

After Quenser got in, several stolen vehicles made their way to the southeastern commercial harbor. That was the source of Azul Hive’s funding.

The cylindrical submersibles they had used when stealing the Collective Farming were stored there. They were the type one rode on top of rather than inside of.

The vehicles stopped on the dock, they unloaded the submersibles, goggles, and oxygen tanks from a pile of containers, and the soldiers made their way back out to sea.

“Our information says the Oriental Magic is constantly sending out powerful radar waves while making its way toward the Legitimacy Kingdom fleet. The insurance organizations that are already screaming about cell phone signals causing cancer would faint if they saw this. Apparently, human flesh would turn as white as boiled chicken at a kilometer away.”

“Then how are we supposed to get close!?”

Heivia’s childish falsetto protest was not enough to stop Millia.

“Submarines prefer to use sonar over radar. Why is that?”

“Are you saying the wall of seawater will weaken the electromagnetic waves enough for us to be safe?”

Quenser found it hard to believe even as he said it, but Millia nodded.

“Despite the overwhelming power they’re using, they still seem to be thinking about efficiency. Instead of sending the microwaves uniformly in three dimensions, it’s more like a two dimensional disk. Think of it like a lighthouse. The light won’t reach the dark ocean. Or rather, it doesn’t need to reach it.”

Still, those numbers had only been roughly detected using an underwater drone. Given the timing of the battle, they would not have had time to get more accurate readings.

There was no safe path.

They only had a path that would keep them alive for the time being.

“Once we’re on the battlefield, make sure you never move to the surface. Stay at least five meters down although ten meters would be ideal. But keep in mind that heading too far down increases the risk of decompression sickness when you come back up. The next time you breathe natural air will be on the deck of the cornered fleet. Let’s go!!”

On Millia’s order, Quenser and the others used the small submersibles to dive down into the lukewarm seawater.

Quenser did not know all that much about the ocean, but he still noticed something strange while operating his submersible. The schools of small fish were moving oddly. They were not approaching the surface and he doubted they were simply afraid of seabirds. He spotted a few fish up above floating on their sides, but the other fish showed no sign of trying to eat them.

He was already seeing the damage being done.

The way the scenery was overwritten by a twisted form of learning gave him a chill.

“What…is that?”

Heivia spoke over the radio from the neighboring submersible.

He was looking straight up.

Several objects resembling long, skinny spears were sticking down from the swaying ocean surface. They looked like strange stalactites or icicles, but they were probably the opposite. In other words, they were actually sticking up above the water.

“Are they like a fishing bobber? Their center of gravity has to be lower down to stay vertical, so the underwater portion is actually larger than the exposed portion.”

“I get that, but what are they? They’re covering the surface for as far as I can see.”

Millia answered that one.

“They’re apparently equipment the Oriental Magic is firing everywhere with a Gatling system. So far, none of them have exploded like a remote cannon or mine. There are unconfirmed reports of them emitting powerful magnetism, so the electronic simulation division suspects they’re auxiliary sensors.”

“Killer radar and extra sensors everywhere? Talk about neurotic. Does the Pilot Elite suspect they’re being stalked if their toothbrush is five centimeters from its usual spot?”

“…”

Putana listened to them while silently looking up with a grim look on her face.

It looked like she was having difficulty accepting something.

The Oriental Magic used its air cushion propulsion device to float from the ocean’s surface, but the massive layer of compressed air below the two hundred thousand ton mass created tiny waves within the ocean as well. The faint stinging on the skin informed them of the monster’s approach.

“That thing can zip around the battlefield at five hundred kph, so why are we catching up to it?”

“That’s because the Princess is holding it back of course.”

They could tell the Princess was moving along the ocean with its naval floats attached. After all, its stability shark anchor plunged

deep into the ocean and that giant extendable pillar very nearly smashed them to pieces.

They frantically moved out of the way, but a few of the submersibles were knocked about and flipped over by the massive water current.

Quenser lost control of his.

“Wah!?”

He was thrown from the submersible as it rotated around like a leaf in the wind. He flailed his limbs around, but he could not stop the momentum carrying him toward the surface. He was headed full speed toward being cooked in the human microwave oven of the killer radar.

But then someone grabbed his hand.

“P-Putana?”

“Please don’t get yourself killed. Then I can’t do it myself.”

Putana had apparently become a tsundere.

“Puny humans can’t keep up with a battle between giants!” said Millia. “Putana, carry Quenser with you from here on. If he stays here, he’ll just be crushed by our own ally. That Object wouldn’t notice any more than we would if we stepped on an ant!”

At any rate, they had to continue on.

They turned their backs on the Princess who continued fighting on the surface and sent their submersibles ever onward.

“Kssshhhh!! Ksshh!! Kssssshhhhhhh!! Ksshhh!! Kssshhhh!!”

“What are you doing, Quenser?”

“It’s no good. I thought I could get a word in to the Princess, but the noise is so bad I can’t get through.”

“Well, of course not with all those radar waves.”

“I guess we can only reach other people underwater with us.”

Quenser began to shift his focus away from the radio, but

something stopped him.

One channel was left open.

“What is this? Oh, I get it. It’s the line for the laser transmissions from the auxiliary cameras on the drone. …But wait.”

“What?”

“Really, what is this? Why is this down there?”

Quenser had one arm around Putana’s waist while the other held his handheld device. His face froze over as he stared at the small screen.

The underwater drone had taken a one-way trip toward the ocean floor to become scrap metal.

It gave a view beyond the vast darkness below that was not visible to the naked eye.

Was it dozens, hundreds, or thousands of meters to the bottom?

Something lay on its side in a place completely cut off from them despite being in the same ocean.

It resembled a manta measuring over ten thousand meters long.

Most likely, it was the giant artificial planet known as the Nataraja.

Part 10

Real_Time_Log.

Network_System_From_“Shuttle_NATARAJA”.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“So what?”

“They noticed us. The Legitimacy Kingdom saw the Nataraja!”

“We already knew we would be exposed. That’s why the Kali is on a

rampage overhead.”

“That’s true, but it wasn’t supposed to be like this!”

“Just to be clear, our freezing process has already begun. We can’t stop it now. You were prepared for that when you came onboard, weren’t you?’

“But it wasn’t supposed to-…”

“And either way, the frogmen can’t get their information out of the ocean. The powerful microwaves will jam the signal.”

“…”

“Also, those microwaves function as an anti-radar ECM. They can’t perform a large-scale search from the surface now. The Kali’s cannon fire and the air pressure from the air cushion are vibrating the water enough to prevent both active and passive sonar from searching the ocean. You understand what that means, don’t you?”

“This ocean has been blacked out?”

“Enough that we could wave our hand right in front of their nose and they wouldn’t notice. It doesn’t matter where the Nataraja was five seconds ago. Even if we move only a kilometer away from there, we can hide in the infinite darkness down here.”

“But the Nataraja is so large it will stir up the water if it moves. We can’t hide like a submarine.”

“The entire point of Kali’s rampage is to let us move. …And it’s all for a single purpose.”

“To escape earth, hm?”

“To surpass Kali Yuga, mankind’s dark age, and gain a new paradise.”

Part 11

“I can’t believe this.”

Quenser's dazed comment quickly grew to a shout of anger.

"I can't believe this!! I thought they were making some gigantic artificial planet, but is this what they were doing!?"

"Teacher, what are you talking about? I thought the Star we discovered at the hotel was meant to leave the earth and all its conflict behind so they could reach a new paradise?"

"That's their goal all right, but we had the method wrong," groaned Quenser. "The Nataraja is a ten thousand meter long artificial planet. They couldn't launch it into space even if they did complete it. Just like debt snowballing out of control, it wouldn't be able to support its own weight. That's why they gave up on that and remade their escape plan into one that didn't require flying."

"…?"

"They built their star to take a centuries or millennia long trip through waterless and airless outer space, so the people inside would still be protected if it dove underwater. And what if no one back up on the surface knew they were there?"

The plans for the ship had contained hastily added notes on a low-temperature environment.

In other words, cold sleep.

That system froze a human at an extremely low temperature to store them for so long it could be called eternity.

"They're waiting for humanity to destroy itself."

"…"

"I don't know if they planned for one or two thousand years or even for just a month or a week, but they're waiting for the balance between the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization to fall apart, some truly hopeless problem to reach us, and for the human race to go extinct. And once that eliminates all the problems, they'll head back up to the surface. Like the old planet shedding its skin, the Nataraja itself can be seen as a small continent. They can move up next to a tropical desert island and create a biofuel resources base."

"Nataraja…that is, Lord Shiva is said to destroy the dark age of Kali

Yuga himself and then create the new age. In that case…"

"Their escape from Earth isn't breaching the atmosphere," declared Quenser. "They're escaping into their artificial planet within the planet."

Supposedly, geniuses had vanished all over the world in all of the world powers.

Those geniuses' lives had likely been a constant fight against the ugly adults. Simply hearing about talent trafficking was enough to know just how unimaginable their hardships were. Plus, that had to only be the tip of the iceberg.

That was why the current planet had left them in despair and they had secretly built an artificial planet to escape it.

And after vanishing while disguising it as abductions and accidents, they had gathered at the Star.

They were the next human race.

Only the skilled and clean people who would not bring any of the current problems with them were allowed on that ark.

"But how much did they prepare for this? They would need energy to support the ten thousand meter structure, energy to support the life support infrastructure, and energy to keep it hidden."

"Wait a second. Are you saying they've opened a hole in the bottom of some storage base's tank!? I know the Capitalist Corporations' long-term civilian space flight plan was scrapped because it used up way too much energy for mere entertainment, but still!!"

"They don't care at all about the old earth, so why would they bother leaving anything for us? They're keeping the data for the World Clock or whatever looking normal while they're actually stealing all the fuel, food, and rare earths they need to survive! And they know the world will fall into chaos once that's found out and the data anesthesia runs out! What kind of future is waiting for us? Will all of the military vehicles stop running as we fight to grab what food we can all while we can't stop the world's food from rotting away at room temperature? You've gotta be kidding me!"

A new icon began flashing on the edge of the screen.

It indicated some data analysis had finished.

“That’s not some swimsuit pinup photos, is it?”

“It’s the data that was left on the hotel’s IP phone. The router was built in, so it recorded all of the data sent out from the room. It’s their data. …What is this? Energy storage filter list? Lure data and a comparison to the real values?”

According to Putana, all of the genius boys and girls except for Mulqueen Sonora had continued on to the Star.

The data on the supposed artificial planet had also come from that hotel.

Quenser had expected to find more detailed information, but he had accidentally reached for the lid of Pandora’s Box.

“The real amount the world has stored?”

The numbers were different from the official reports.

They were far, far removed from the values everyone believed in.

What was it he found there?

“……

“Hey, Quenser, what’s the matter? Hey!”

“You’re better off not knowing.”

“Hm?”

“This is…this is just hopeless. The world would completely boil over!!”

Electricity and fuel truly would vanish from the world. The little bit brought by solar or wind power would be meaningless. They could try to use Object reactors for general power, but they did not yet have any way of setting them up like that. In other words, everything would rot away like trash. A single type of the saprophytic bacteria that consumed trash would prosper and all other microbes would have no place left. But that single type of saprophytic bacteria would be wiped out when exposed to its weakness of heat or ultraviolet light.

That would lead to a world without microbes.

In that world, the piles of trash would never rot. They would simply be eroded into dust and the rain or mist would turn it into sticky sludge. The sea of sludge covering the surface would become the enemy of bacteria, plants, animals, and all forms of life.

Quenser understood why the geniuses had hidden the existence of their artificial planet.

If something like that was “within reach”, no one would allow it. Some would simply try to take back the stolen fuel and resources while others might arrive with a smile as they asked to be let onboard.

That ark of salvation would transform into a plank of Carneades that washed out blood with blood.

That was why they had to hide it at all costs.

Quenser looked back while clinging to Putana’s waist.

“It’s possible the Oriental Magic attacked the fleet so forcefully because they didn’t want the fleet staying in this area of the ocean for so long. They attacked before we could discover them.”

“Wait a minute. Are you saying that Nataraja thing is using this commotion to escape to some other part of the ocean!?”

“Yeah, and while wasting a bunch of the stolen resources that we all need to live. Hurry, Heivia. We can’t head down to the bottom of the ocean with our current equipment. We need to get to the fleet and tell Frolaytia and the others about this!! With the killer radio waves and cannon vibrations, we can’t search above or below the sea, so we’re practically blind. We won’t be able to track it whether it moves one hundred kilometers away or just one hundred centimeters away!!”

Part 12

Quenser and the others arrived at the Legitimacy Kingdom fleet.

They were nervous enough for their throats to dry up when they surfaced, but fortunately they did not become human torches.

A rope ladder was lowered for them to climb up onto a small aircraft carrier. They roughly secured the small submersibles with ropes and adhesive. They looked a lot like the magnet-attached human torpedoes seen in old war movies.

Frolaytia met the soaking-wet group in a conference room and she got down to business without bothering to greet them.

“Technically, it was the submersibles I wanted here, not you. As you should know, we can approach the battlefield from below using them. It gives us more options than waiting for the final moment as that killer radar approaches.”

“If it’s that bad, why not move the ships back?” asked Heivia.

“You’re not serious, are you?” replied Quenser with a shrug. “We’re up against an Object here. If it wanted to, it could move at five hundred kph. If the Princess messes up holding it back, it’ll chase us to the other side of the planet with its killer radar on at full blast.”

“Exactly. The situation is hopeless. With this much interference, they can even pretend they didn’t receive our White Flag signal. We need to make sure the Princess wins no matter what and that means breaking through the Oriental Magic’s stronghold.”

While speaking, Frolaytia connected the projector to her laptop with a cable.

She displayed some quickly thrown together documents on one wall.

“The biggest bottleneck is that the Princess’s main cannons can’t hit the enemy. We’ve done some scans, but the Oriental Magic’s own movements aren’t all that clever.”

“You mean there’s something diverting the Princess’s shells or screwing with her ballistic calculations?” asked Quenser.

He looked to the projector and saw the many “spears” sticking vertically from the ocean surface.

“We can’t perform any decent scans with all the electromagnetic waves, but we still have some partial information. They seem to be

sporadically emitting extremely powerful magnetism, but it isn't all of the spears all the time. It's like a game of whack-a-mole. Which ones activate must be randomized, but there are always three of them emitting magnetism."

Quenser groaned quietly when he heard that.

Despite the approaching threat, his curiosity as a promising engineer reared its ugly head.

"The three-body problem? That does sound like something people obsessed with a 'Star' would come up with."

"What's that?"

"It can be the moon, the earth, or the sun. All celestial bodies have a gravitational pull and all of them are pulling on each other as they move around. Now, here's the question: how do you find what kind of influence is caused by three celestial bodies pulling on each other?"

"What? How should I know? The rotation of the earth and the revolution of the moon are probably explained by a chalkboard full of cryptic equations. That's not a very good riddle."

"No." Quenser shook his head. "The answer isn't known. No one can reach an accurate answer."

"Wait. You're kidding, right?"

"I'm not. You can easily calculate out the influence of two, but there's nothing we can do when it gets to three or more. Lately, they can reach 'approximate values' using a supercomputer, but that's like saying pi is more or less three. The exact answer is still impossible to find."

"Yes, this is a control system that artificially creates that three-body problem." Frolaytia pointed at the projected document with her long, skinny kiseru. "Powerful magnetism can bend the paths of plasma, electron beams, coilguns, or railguns, but if it's a simple pull in one direction, the post-interference trajectory can be calculated out and corrected for. …That's when they bring in this randomized three-body problem. Honestly, it's giving me a headache."

Still absolutely soaking wet, Millia frowned.

She seemed to be having trouble picturing the situation.

“Major Capistrano, didn’t Quenser just say a supercomputer can produce an ‘approximate value’? Can’t you reassign the Object’s electronic processing time to open up some space for that? For example, you could abandon control of the smaller anti-personnel cannons.”

“We thought about that, but it was no use. The approximate value for a rocket’s trajectory would take months to calculate. With the spears’ magnetism constantly being turned on and off randomly, reaching an instant calculation is impossible. Not to mention that we wouldn’t be able to correct for the error introduced by the approximate value. The shells are useless if they don’t hit. We won’t get a participation trophy just because we graze the Object two centimeters off the side.”

“Um, what about laser beams?” asked Putana. “Those are pure light, so I don’t think the magnetism would affect them.”

“They seem to have another defense system for that. They’ve made unbreakable bubbles by mixing a special rubber adhesive with water and scattered them around to bend any light that hits them. In any other situation, I’d want to take a video and pass it on to the technology division.”

The low-stability plasma cannon, railgun, coilgun, rapid-fire beam cannon, and laser beams could not reach the Oriental Magic.

That meant the Princess could not win as long as that system existed.

“I want one of these.”

Frolaytia used her kiseru to point at the spears on the screen.

“Dive down and collect one. How do they work, how do they coordinate with each other, and how can we break this system? If we can figure that out, we can find a way out of this. At the very least, we can place the Princess in the same ring.”

In other words, their mission was as awful as ever.

Heivia and the others looked on the verge of tears. It almost seemed they were going to give up on it all, board a submersible, and run off on their own, but then they realized something.

The entire unit could not afford for them to reject this mission.

More importantly, running away here would not solve the Nataraja problem. It was using up all of the resources it had stolen to maintain its ten thousand meter form. If those resources were not retrieved soon, everyone would have to bear the debt. The entire world would become a waste dump which would leave the explosive expansion and extinction of the one kind of saprophytic bacteria. That would lead to a world of sludge with no microbes. Every continent would be covered in gray sludge and that would leave no escape.

So they had to do this whether they liked it or not.

They had no choice but to succeed.

(Fortunately, the two objectives are pointed in the same direction. If we can silence the Oriental Magic, we can search this area of ocean like normal. The Nataraja is huge and it wasn't originally designed to dive down like a submarine. They set up this situation because they were afraid of being heard as they moved through the ocean, so the Nataraja won't be able to escape.)

Quenser forcibly encouraged himself like that.

With doom only ten minutes away, he tried to give his heart a running start.

But he was being too naïve.

The next problem arrived only a moment later.

The entire small aircraft carrier shook and tilted as if an explosive blast had hit it.

Part 13

This was different from a simple fire or explosion in the ammunition storage.

They could hear the short, dry bursts even from the conference room.

“You’re kidding me. Did they directly board the ship to eliminate anyone who knows about the Nataraja’s secret!?”

Heivia was utterly shocked, but he still caught the submachinegun Frolaytia threw his way. He smoothly loaded the first round while Millia and Putana pulled out their own handguns.

Frolaytia tore the internal phone line receiver from the wall.

“Where are they coming from!?”

“A huge hole was blown in the port side near the waterline! It was probably one of the Faith Organization’s Spear Squids. To avoid an Object’s anti-air lasers, they remain in the water to the very last second and hop up only twenty meters in front of their target!”

“Who got in through the hole?”

“There’s a single midsized transport submersible sticking in through the hole. But, major, be careful what route you choose to evacuate. This thing has a ton of amphibious powered suits inside it!!”

Heivia looked up at the ceiling when he heard that.

This was a military warship, but it only had rockets and shoulder-fired missiles for handheld self-defense. If the soldiers were given too much firepower, they could easily blow away a fuel pipe or the ammunition storage if they panicked. People often thought of a military ship as a hunk of steel, but they were filled with flammable materials. That was why they generally let the ship itself or a fighter take care of things when the situation called for a missile.

However, the enemy had made it onboard.

Gathering all the handguns and submachineguns in the ship would not help when their opponent had powered suits.

There were hundreds of people onboard, but they would be tormented to death at this rate.

“Heivia and Putana, help me out here.”

But Quenser quickly spoke up.

Heivia was dumbfounded as the mere student elaborated.

“Let’s drive out those amphibious powered suits! Frolaytia, please

tell us the shortest route to the hangar. We can get one of the missiles loaded on the fighters there. If I swap out the fuse, I can use it like a normal bomb to blow away the powered suits!"

"Yeah, that's right. No matter the situation, the army has to make do with what's available to them. Let's go with that."

Quenser's handheld device received a transmission. Frolaytia had sent him a map of the aircraft carrier.

"Sorry, but I'll be headed to the bridge. Whatever they're after, we need to prepare for the worst and set the emergency lock on the classified information. That should require my authorization. Lieutenant Newburg, can I borrow some bodyguards from your intelligence division?"

"Yes, I suppose. Although I'm little confused why a base commander would want to stick around at a time like this."

"That's simple: because this battalion was left in my care."

That could not be as simple as she claimed. With all the high-level classified information she had, she could not afford to be captured. She most likely had a "special bullet" in her breast pocket just in case.

They all left the conference room and turned in different directions.

Frolaytia spoke without looking back.

"Make sure you survive this."

"Of course."

They hurried on their separate ways. Quenser's group was on the way to the hangar to obtain the missile they needed to use against the amphibious powered suits while Frolaytia's group was on the way to the bridge to protect the classified information.

The ship was intermittently filled with disconcerting shaking.

"Who are these people anyway?"

"What? They've got to be the people working with the artificial planet…no, the ocean shelter called the Nataraja."

"Not that. The Nataraja intends to abandon the human race living

on the old planet. They want to hide their position at all costs, so I doubt they'll be collecting these people. So why are they obeying the Nataraja?"

"They probably don't want to be saved themselves," said Millia Newburg. "They don't care as long as they can save whatever it is they call 'the world'. They think they're too filthy for that perfect world. They can say that with a smile on their lips and a gun in their hands, so the Nataraja is using them as disposable soldiers."

"Guilt might be at the root of it all," added Putana.

Guilt.

At the very least, the Nataraja had the Oriental Magic helping it. And maybe the Flyaway from the northern mountains as well. The powered suits attacking the aircraft carrier clearly were not amateurs.

They were all highly-trained professional soldiers.

Perhaps only the ones who had grown disgusted with their jobs had been recruited.

"I'm not gonna get caught in the middle of their burnout syndrome. It sounds to me like they're afraid of dying alone, so they want us to all die together."

Heivia and Putana took the lead, Millia stayed back as the rear guard, and Quenser walked between them as the only one without a gun. They made their way down the corridor, but the going was tough. The corridor was tilted diagonally, one steel wall was split because the ship itself had twisted from the initial blast, and shrapnel had skewered into the opposite wall. The pipes running through the ceiling must have broken in places because white steam was blowing down here and there.

Also…

"Those bastards."

Heivia could not help but groan when they arrived near the hangar.

He had heard intense gunfire coming from their destination.

"Were the powered suits targeting the hangar, too!? It's starting to

look like they're just going to sink the entire ship to silence us!!"

There were a few highly flammable areas of the aircraft carrier that were especially dangerous. For example, the engine room and the ammunition storage. The aircraft hangar was just as dangerous and important. The fighters naturally had missiles hanging from their wings and jet fuel filling their tanks. Any kind of fire was completely off limits there. If it was set on fire, the damage could quickly surpass what the ship was designed to endure and it could erupt from within.

However…

"That's even more reason we can't ignore this. If we don't drive them out, we'll all be fish food."

"I get that, but I'm not about to play the hero and get roasted like a turkey. I've already decided I'm going to die on top of a woman."

With sweat covering his face, Heivia pressed in next to the small door for maintenance soldiers to enter the hangar. Putana moved to the other side and they lowered the watertight door's lever to open it.

Immediately, a scorching wave of heat stopped them in their tracks. Orange light swept horizontally across the room they were just about to step inside.

"Gyah!?"

Heivia frantically grabbed Putana by the back of the neck and pulled her back.

Flames continued to rage on the other side of the half-opened door. This was not an accidental blaze. Someone was clearly switching it on and off.

"That's a flamethrower," groaned Millia.

They were in trouble if the amphibious powered suits had brought weaponry like that. The heat of flamethrowers was frightening, but their greatest threat was the lack of oxygen they created in closed spaces. In older wars, that had been used to take care of enemy soldiers hidden in trenches or tunnels, but it would be just as cruelly effective in the corridors and cabins of an aircraft carrier.

But a moment later, Quenser saw something unexpected.

The ones wrapped in flames and running around in a panic were masses of exposed metal. It was the amphibious powered suits.

He also heard an overpowering shout coming from the hangar.

“You fools!! Did you think we couldn’t fight without any rockets!? Did you forget an aircraft carrier is in no short supply of jet fuel!?”

The two idiots exchanged a glance.

“Hey, that sounded a lot like the old maintenance lady’s voice to me.”

“What a coincidence, Quenser. But we might be hearing the same hallucination in a case of mass hysteria. Let’s do this carefully.”

The two of them hesitantly peered inside the hangar.

It was a complete disaster.

Several blackened powered suits lay on the ground while tongues of flame still burned here and there. They were covered in thick armor, but if the external heat reached their internal processors, it was no different from burning the motherboard with a lighter. The silicon circuits would be fried and the suits would be brought to a stop.

The one ruling over it all was a veteran old woman carrying a jet nozzle that seemed to have a refueling hose jury-rigged onto it.

“Wahh!! That’s clearly her!”

“Hm? Yeah, I tend to get really fired up when it comes to an outmatched force resorting to guerrilla warfare. I am from the country Nobunaga conquered, after all.”

“Are you insane!? How can you use a flamethrower in the hangar!? Aren’t you afraid of setting something off!?”

“If I let them in, they would’ve blown up the entire ship, so I didn’t have a choice. And I did put together a countermeasure. I took the missiles, the fuel tanks, and anything else that’s really dangerous and covered them in the electrified fire-resistant coating of a dust collector. It may not be much, but it’s the silicon powder used in weapon paint. And nothing blew up, so there’s that.”

“That’s just scary. In fact, now I’m curious what this old lady was like when she was younger.”

The old maintenance lady ignored Heivia’s annoyed comment and turned her eyes in a new direction.

She looked to the brown girl named Putana Highball.

“Are you the pilot of the Collective Farming I’ve heard so much about?”

“No, I am the Elite of the Sarasvati.”

Putana’s unnecessary correction only elicited an “I see” from the old lady.

She then said one more thing.

“Sorry.”

She did not explain what that was in reference to.

And then…

“Ksshh!! This is the engine room. The powered suits have arrived right in front of our door. We’re returning fire, but we don’t have enough firepower. Anyone who can, please come help!!”

“Did those fools send troops to all of the fuel-related facilities? Are they trying to split the entire ship in two!?”

The old maintenance lady clicked her tongue and Heivia spoke up.

“What should we do? Remain here or head to the engine room!?”

“Neither. There’s something you all need to do. And something else that Elite needs to do.”

“?”

Putana frowned and the old lady grabbed a notebook-sized tablet from a nearby wooden box before tossing it to Quenser.

“What’s this?”

“The monitoring data related to the Baby Magnum. It’s incomplete due to those killer radar waves, but it’s enough to know things

aren't going well. The Princess is being worn down pretty bad. At this rate, she'll be crushed before we can find a way out of this."

"Dammit!!" swore Quenser as he looked to the screen.

The Baby Magnum's mobility was its main selling point, so it would continually evade the enemy's cannon fire, block the enemy's escape with its seven main cannons, focus those main cannons once the enemy was stopped, and fire them all into the enemy. That was the ideal strategy.

But the data on the screen showed it all falling apart.

First and foremost, the Baby Magnum's cannon fire was not reaching the Oriental Magic. The enemy was being careful and never approaching within five kilometers, so the Baby Magnum had to use a much more dangerous strategy of forcing its way in close and trying to get the enemy to fall back on its own.

And because of that…

"What is this? Is she sacrificing the outermost main cannons?"

"For the attacks she can't completely avoid. But it's a double-edged sword. They can't take hits like that forever. And if they explode, it'll throw off the Object's balance. If the Oriental Magic uses its main laser cannon in that moment, it's all over."

The Princess would understand that, but she could not protect the fleet behind her any other way.

The disturbance in the monitoring data showed just how much she was struggling and suffering.

And even after all of that, the Baby Magnum was slowly being pushed back. The maximum range of the Oriental Magic's killer radar waves was pushing in on the maintenance fleet.

But…

Even if Quenser and the others could search out a weakness in the countless "spears" standing up from the ocean, they saw no way that would actually help. There was no guarantee it would speed up the process.

The old lady did not expect that either.

She said something else instead.

“I have only one idea of how to escape this situation, but it requires disobeying military regulations. Are you still willing to hear me out?”

“What exactly is it?”

“The Collective Farming is moored here for analysis and we have the one and only Pilot Elite who can use it in battle. The reactor is still running for analysis of the system. As long as she has the unlock key we added on, Putana Highball can bring it back to life.”

Everyone turned toward the brown girl.

She responded with a self-deprecating smile.

“You want me to save this fleet and end up in a court martial? And all to save the enemy fleet that stole my Sarasvati and essentially stripped me bare!?”

“If you don’t like it, you don’t have to do it. Either way, we don’t have the authority to force a POW to fight.” The old lady explained the facts with a grim look on her face. “If that happens, we’ll either sink with the ship or be roasted by the killer radar waves. In a way, you’ll be getting your revenge.”

“…”

It was now Putana’s turn to look at everyone else.

Unable to bear the silence, Heivia let a comment slip out.

“W-will everyone really let that happen? What about our huge-breasted commander?”

“Hmph. I’m sure she expected us to do this. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have let a former enemy soldier keep her gun in front of an officer. It’s just that her position prevents her from directly ordering us to do this.”

“Even if that’s true, where would we find the unlock key the Legitimacy Kingdom added?”

“That boy has it right there.”

The old lady’s comment almost made Quenser drop the tablet.

They had everything they needed.

Putana narrowed her eyes and opened her mouth.

“What’s in it for me?”

“Will an argument from emotion work?”

“Your idea of justice is not the same as mine.”

“How about you sink the Collective Farming in the sea afterwards and make it look like a malfunction? If you detonate the reactor while you’re at it, it won’t be possible for us to continue analyzing it. You can make an offering of your Object.”

Putana’s eyelids twitched a bit.

It was clear the old lady had found a weak point.

“Fine then. The word ‘offering’ has a nice ring to it. I need to offer it up to heaven myself.”

“We’re in your debt.”

A moment later, a heavy impact shook the entire hangar.

In fact, it might have shaken the entire aircraft carrier.

Millia stared toward one of the waterproof doors.

“That was close by!!”

“Go, boy! The Collective Farming’s help and the analysis of those spears are both necessary for our survival. Get that Elite in her Object before she’s killed!!”

They heard another explosion.

The entire floor tilted like a slide. Heivia and Millia immediately grabbed on the sides of containers held down with wires, but Quenser and Putana were too slow. They could only slide down with the tilt and were quickly carried seventy meters away.

There was no way to regroup due to the tilt, so Millia shouted down at them.

“Getting shot while waiting around would be too boring, so we’ll

meet up in the ocean!!”

“Understood!!”

Quenser yelled back, grabbed Putana’s hand, and made his way to the nearest steel door.

All of the corridors were in an awful state. The entire ship must have bent because the walls and ceiling were split. White steam and bluish-white sparks were falling down like a weeping cherry tree. Fortunately, there was no noisy gunfire or explosions.

“What route do we take!?”

“We need to climb to the deck up top. The Object is held between two aircraft carriers with countless wires, so it would be fastest to get there that way.”

They ran up some narrow metal stairs.

Once they reached the flat flight deck, they found several impromptu research rooms that looked like armored metal containers. They would probably get in the way of jets taking off or landing, but analyzing the Object was more important than normal weaponry.

Quenser used the tablet the old lady had given him to check on the numbers and roles of the different research rooms. He entered one that was filled with computers and cables, but he ignored all that and grabbed a mannequin in one corner.

“Putana, this is your special suit, right? You can change into it later, but you’ll definitely need it.”

“Currently, I have close to zero chance of defeating this enemy. I can buy some time, but do not expect too much.”

“I understand that. We’ll do something in the ocean before you’re sunk.”

As soon as they left the container research room, they heard a great roar.

The door of the elevator that carried fighters down below shot up like a manhole during a sudden downpour.

A scorched metal arm grew from the door.

A monster was crawling up from the hangar below.

“A powered suit!?”

Quenser frantically pushed Putana’s slender form.

That was all he managed.

A multiple-launch rocket launcher blew away the container research room.

Part 14

Putana Highball fell onto her butt.

The black smoke and dust obscured her vision. The disastrous scene was only revealed once the sea breeze blew the smokescreen away.

The container research room was taller than she was, but it had been blown to pieces and the walls and ceiling were scattered everywhere.

Quenser Barbotage had pushed her out of the way and he was lying face-down on the ground. Metal wreckage covered him from the waist down.

“Teacher?”

“Dammit. Hurry up and go, Putana.”

There must have been firearms in the research room because they were lying all over the ground. He was trying to reach a shotgun that would be relatively easy for an amateur to use, but he could not reach it. That proved that he was pinned either at the legs or the waist.

Putana quickly grabbed at the container wall, but a human’s strength was not enough to move it. It did not even budge a few millimeters, so it felt like it was welded directly to the deck.

“It’s no use, Putana, so hurry to the Object! The powered suit is still moving!!”

“You can’t defeat that with a shotgun!”

“I can destroy its camera lenses or sensor heads!!”

“You can’t even shoot a 9mm handgun!”

The powered suit produced a rough metallic sound. It must have carelessly fired all of its rockets, so it was selecting another weapon.

“You weren’t this kind of person. You weren’t like those powered suits that don’t care if they die as long as they can help someone save the world!”

“I know that. I know I’m just trying to look good.”

He breathed heavily and stretched his hand even further out.

His fully extended hand touched the shotgun’s grip.

“But I can’t help but wonder. If we fail here and you can’t get to the Collective Farming, what will happen to the Princess who’s still fighting? What will happen to everyone else who’s counting on her to win!? So please, Putana! Please!! Get in that Object to go save the Princess!!”

This time, Quenser’s hand got a solid grip on the shotgun.

He aimed not toward the powered suit but toward the brown girl.

Putana shook her head.

Still, she took a few steps back.

She moved toward the Object.

“Sorry, Putana…”

Quenser said the same thing the old maintenance lady had.

But what he meant was probably a little different. He said more afterwards.

“I was ecstatic. At the time, I laughed and thought that was the best possible method. We didn’t have to fight a war, the Princess didn’t have to head out to battle, the enemy Elite didn’t have to die, and we could still win. It seemed like a dream come true and I was so happy. But I was wrong.”

“…”

“It may have changed form, but war is still war. I set up a cheap surprise attack and stole your life from you. I finally understand that. So I’m sorry, Putana.”

A metallic sound burst out.

The powered suit’s palm had changed form and a harpoon-like tip jutted out.

It was probably a speargun but with enough power to tear through a steel wall.

Quenser held the shotgun’s stock to his shoulder despite not really knowing how to hold it and he gave a shout to numb his fear.

“Go, Putana!!”

That finally gave the girl the push she needed.

She grabbed the tablet that had fallen nearby.

She turned her back on the boy whose legs were pinned and she ran as fast as she could. The sounds of the powered suit continued, but the speargun did not skewer her back. Instead of a laser pointer, the shotgun had a circular guide light and Quenser relied on it to fire just before the speargun did. The scatter shot hit the arm and body to shift its aim just enough.

But it was obvious what the powered suit would do after that interference.

It would temporarily take on a new target.

"…!!"

Putana did not turn around despite the repeated gunfire she heard.

She made her way to the Object held between the two small aircraft carriers by wires. The wires both held the Object in place and allowed the maintenance soldiers to move around. They would walk on one while another two acted as railings. She followed that upside-down triangle layout toward the spherical body.

Sorry, Putana.

Two people had said that to her here.

And of all people, they were soldiers of an enemy nation.

Her parents, teacher, instructor, and priest had all insisted piloting the Object was the right thing to do, so she had not even questioned it when they trampled on the dream she had drawn in crayon while little.

What had she truly wanted to protect?

What path had she truly wanted to take?

She had gotten unusually angry at the talent trafficking in Lost Angels's northern mountains. She had seen herself in that, but wasn't that because she was not entirely satisfied with her upbringing?

When the Sarasvati had been taken, she had felt like she had lost a part of herself, but had that really been pure anger? The Sarasvati had trampled on her true dream, so hadn't her hatred of the Legitimacy Kingdom come from her fear of no longer being able to justify the fact that she had thrown away her dream?

"…!!"

The identity within her was stripped away, bit by bit.

Or perhaps the safety device the Legitimacy Kingdom had installed to effectively control her and her unique power was beginning to break.

She reached the back of the spherical body. When she brought the

tablet close, a wireless signal opened barriers one through seventy, exposing a straight slide-like tunnel. She ran inside. What awaited her at the very end was the cockpit of the colossal weapon that she had relied on and that had relied on her.

All of the monitors were dead and none of the lights were on.

The only light source was the tablet and it linked with the Pilot Elite voice recognition system.

So she spoke.

Quenser Barbotage and the old maintenance lady whose name she did not know had said something to her that no one else had during her life.

She thought of them as trustworthy comrades a she spoke.

“I’m back, Sarasvati. It’s time for war.”

All of the monitors immediately came to life.

She stripped off the short dress she had worn from Lost Angels and she donned the special suit of a Pilot Elite. She attached the many belts and they tightened to hold her in midair. Ten or more endoscope-like sensors extended to observe various parts of her body.

She became a weapon.

She combined with a colossal weapon that had the destructive power of a god.

Part 15

With his leg caught in the rubble, Quenser held the shotgun as he had seen others do. The only reason the shots hit was the excellent automated assistance including the circular guide light.

But that was not enough to destroy the approaching powered suit.

Each time he fired, the pain shooting through his shoulder felt like

a bicycle was running over it. Also, the noise stabbing into his ears made him feel dizzy. The powered suit grew unsteady every time it was shot, but it did not stop walking. Eventually, a shallow cut appeared on Quenser's cheek. The enemy had not fired. One of his shots had ricocheted back.

And even that did not last long.

An odd sound came from the shotgun. No matter how often he pulled the trigger, it would not fire. He was out of ammunition. When he realized that, the powered suit was already looking down on him.

"……

Neither of them said anything.

He did not have time to feel any obvious fear.

The powered suit simply lifted its leg as if to crush an empty can.

A moment later, a great force from the side swept the powered suit away like a toy.

The suit had to be heavy enough to hold its ground if a small car hit it, but it was not some bizarre super weapon that sent it flying for over five meters.

It was a snapped wire.

The countless wires supporting the Object began snapping once the monster started moving. They shot outwards like a stretched rubber band cut by scissors and one of them had flown across the deck.

The powered suit still tried to get up.

Yet if it had played dead, it might have been overlooked.

A dark shadow covered the entire flight deck that was easily large enough for a basketball game. It was like a giant peering into a miniature garden. But this giant had a huge cultivator attached. It looked like a street cleaner with the rotating brush exchanged for dull metal blades.

The two arms supporting the rotating blades lowered them from the steel sky.

A tremendous sound followed.

With the sound of crunching metal, the aircraft carrier's flight deck was pried open like a can. A deluge of orange sparks flew out. The destruction was so great it was impossible to tell what had happened to the powered suit in the middle.

The entire aircraft carrier tilted.

"Ah…waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhh!?"

Quenser reached toward the flight deck so he would not slide down. That was when he realized he had been freed. The wreckage of a metal wall pinning him down had been knocked off of him and into the ocean when the aircraft carrier tilted.

"Putana?"

"Teacher, I have no intention of taking responsibility for your life."

When he held his aching ankle and looked up, her voice came from the Collective Farming's speakers.

"If you want to survive, stand on your own two feet."

Nothing more needed to be said.

Quenser used his own two feet to jump from the edge of the flight deck and into the ocean. He then swam to the small submersibles attached to the hull by ropes. Meanwhile, the Collective Farming left the two aircraft carriers and crossed the great ocean to support the Baby Magnum.

Work to defeat the Oriental Magic was in progress both above and below the water's surface.

Part 16

Quenser joined Heivia, Millia, and the others in the ocean.

Millia spoke over the radio while taking the lead.

"The closest of the 'spears' are about five kilometers away, but the

problem is the depth. We've been staying at around ten meters, but we'll have to cut that distance in half to investigate them."

"Are you serious? Can't cellphone signals kill sperm? I think I heard someone say not to keep them in your pants pocket for that reason."

"Worst case, this will boil your balls white," said Quenser in annoyance. "Millia, how about we attach a rope or wire to it and drag it into the water? That way, we can investigate the exposed portion without going up to the surface."

"You saw how big those 'floats' are, didn't you? Are we really strong enough to pull them down?"

"We just have to destroy whatever it's using for buoyancy. If it has a layer of air, we can open a hole and let water in."

"Then we would need wires to keep it from sinking."

As they discussed the issue, they arrived at their destination.

They could see the sharp spears sticking down from the ocean surface like icicles or stalactites.

"The edge of the asparagus field has already spread within five kilometers of the fleet. If the Object itself rushes in, the ten kilometer line of death won't be far off."

"Then let's get started. We need to attach the wire with rubber adhesive. We'll play rock-paper-scissors to see who gets to do it."

When Millia immediately lost despite having suggested the idea, she quickly began pulling rank. Unable to disobey his commander's selfish orders, Private First Class Heivia was stuck with the job as the lowest ranking person there.

"Wait! What about the student over here!?"

"I'm a guest, of course. Now get going, errand boy."

Quenser was heartless when dealing with anyone who was not a beautiful girl. That was a universal law.

One of the intelligence agents had managed to grab a tool kit during the commotion, so they had an electric drill to work with.

As Heivia nervously attached the wire, he received a ridiculous

demand from below.

“Heivia, when you’re done, drill some holes in the side. If it’s like a fishing bobber, the top half is a balloon and the bottom half is a weight!”

“D-don’t be ridiculous!! If I go up to the surface, I’ll be throwing myself into a human microwave oven!!”

“Quenser. I know it’s reckless, but how about you attach the ‘spear’ to your submersible and dive straight down? If we can bring the thing down by even a few meters, Heivia can work more safely in the ocean.”

“Oh, that’s just great!! All of a sudden, it’s set in stone that I have to do all the work up here!!”

The burden was enough to cause a disconcerting rumbling in the submersible, but the buoyant spear was forced down into the water. Heivia used that short time to drill several holes on the upper half of the side.

“Oh, yeah. And you could electrocute yourself if you sever any of the cables inside, so be careful.”

“Bfh!! Tell me that *before* I’ve done it all!!”

White air bubbles blew out, so they seemed to have successfully gotten the seawater to flow into the layer used to provide buoyancy.

After supporting the falling spear with the wire and the submersibles, they gathered around it to investigate the equipment.

“This is the top and this is the bottom. Now, listen. It might still be running, so don’t go anywhere near the top.”

“Huh? Why not?”

“It has a huge magnet powerful enough to bend an Object’s main cannon, so what do you think would happen if it activated here? It might tug on our belts and smash us all into one happy chunk of mincemeat.”

“Waaaah!?”

“Don’t strip, Heivia. That’s just pathetic. If I’m right – oh, and it

looks like I am – this thing's magnetism is set in a single direction. If you're not in the direction of that trumpet opening, it won't affect you."

"How can you tell?" asked Millia.

Quenser pointed to the unit on the top.

"If this was a normal magnet, the submersibles would have been wiped out when we passed below the battlefield the first time. And while railguns and coilguns are one thing, you don't find magnets powerful enough to bend a low-stability plasma cannon just anywhere. Most likely, this uses the same kind of cluster electromagnet used inside plasma cannons or to protect JPlevelMHD reactors."

"That tech has its roots in the tokamak fusion reactors of an older age, right?"

"That trumpet opening might use the Meissner effect. That refers to the perfect diamagnetism created as a byproduct of superconductor technology. Simply put, this trumpet concentrates the magnetism in a single direction instead of letting it scatter in every direction. It's a lot like a shaped charge."

"Hm? But wait."

Heivia moved below the spear that was lying on its side.

"You say it's using a crazy powerful electromagnet, but how's it running? If it was battery powered, it would need a pretty big one."

"Its power source probably isn't contained inside."

"Are you saying it's connected to the Object with an underwater cable?"

"I doubt it. Here's your answer."

Quenser pointed to another unit on the top of the spear.

It was shaped like a twenty centimeter decorative plate.

"It uses wireless power. Specifically, microwave power transmission."

"Micro…ah!? You don't mean…!?"

Part 17

On the Indian Ocean, the Princess sat utterly confused inside the Baby Magnum's cockpit.

Her usually reliable main cannons were of no use, she could find no solution to the artificial three-body problem, and now the supposedly captured Collective Farming was providing covering fire without sending out an identification code.

But even in that extreme situation, she did not forget her job.

To untangle the threads as much as possible, she stared at one of the countless opened windows.

A normal radar scan could not gather much information with the powerful microwaves filling the region, but she could still guess at the situation using the pieces of data she did receive.

"…"

She felt like a criminal standing in the city square for a public execution.

That was just how just many irritating gazes she seemed to feel concentrating on her.

And there was a reason she felt that.

(I had thought it was strange.)

Her enemy's Gatling ejector had scattered spears across the region of sea. The plate-like devices attached to the side were slowly turning their heads.

They seemed to be focusing on a single point.

They accurately followed the Oriental Magic's movements as if receiving something from it.

(It's far too powerful for simple radar. I thought it was a cruel killer microwave weapon, but it isn't. It's actually…)

"Microwave power transmission. Are all of those 'spears' receiving

power from the Object and transforming it into magnetism!?”

Part 18

“That’s right, Heivia. Something was bothering me about that killer radar because it seemed unnecessarily over-the-top. I could understand it if we were in some complicated array of trenches or the deep rainforest, but do you really need something like that to kill people on the open ocean? Just tackling them with the two hundred thousand ton Object would do the trick. So it seemed natural to assume it had some other purpose, right? The radar and anti-personnel usage was just some chemical seasoning used to hide the true purpose.”

“And that purpose was wide-area microwave power transmission tech, huh?”

Millia spat out the words as she grabbed the edge of the plate-like part and found it moved around like a sunflower.

“Normally, there isn’t much point in sending out Object-class cannons and letting them borrow the reactor’s power. The shockwaves of firing a railgun or coilgun and the residual heat of firing a laser beam or low-stability plasma cannon would destroy the thing. On the other hand, if they add on enough armor to withstand that, the tank or bomber would be crushed by its own weight.”

“But that doesn’t matter with these. They’re only emitting highly directional magnetism, so there is no recoil or residual heat. And as an added bonus, it only uses technology originally used to protect reactors or cannons, so it fits in quite well.”

“Come to think of it,” cut in Heivia with another question. “These ‘spears’ are being randomly switched on and off to prevent analysis using the three-body problem, right? But would they be able to communicate properly through all these microwaves?”

“Heivia, what’s the only main cannon that can get through the pseudo three-body problem made with magnetism?”

“The laser beam… Oh, so that’s it.”

“Look, it has an infrared emitter. It probably uses that. Laser transmissions can be harder to use than electromagnetic waves, but there are ‘spears’ all over the place. I bet they have a spider web of a network set up.”

As he spoke, Quenser covered the infrared emitter’s lens with rubber adhesive.

That would prevent the electromagnet from suddenly activating and swallowing them up.

“We probably should have brought laser transmission equipment of our own. Then we could have coordinated with the Princess and Putana up top.”

“It’s almost impossible to use laser transmissions between the ocean and the surface. The surface bends it too much. Haven’t you ever done the experiment where you shine light diagonally into a water tank?” After explaining that, Quenser went over their conditions one by one. “A float, an electromagnet, wireless power transmission, and laser communications… The pieces are gradually coming into view. As long as we know what it needs, we can get rid of that to interfere with them. The real problem is the number of ‘spears’.”

“Do you have an idea?” asked Millia.

“Yes,” answered Quenser. “I’ll explain on the way. But this is just a theory, so could you leave some of the intelligence division to continue investigating this thing in case we hit a dead end?”

“Sure, that’s fine. But ‘on the way’? Where are we going?”

“The fleet. I need to prepare some things to take out all of the ‘spears’ at once. I’ll get what I need from the fleet.”

“Hey, Quenser, will you really find exactly what you need? We’re not talking about ammunition cases in a zombie game here.”

“Not to worry. We’ve already seen what we need.”

“?”

Quenser and the others left their fellow intelligence division members as they turned back toward the fleet.

However, the situation soon changed.

They saw the entire small aircraft carrier before rising to the water's surface.

There was a simple reason: it was filling with water and beginning to sink.

"Dammit!! Were they not able to push them back!?"

Heivia frantically operated his radio and Frolaytia's staticky voice reached them.

"Ksshhh. Due to the great damage, we abandoned the ship and… ksshh…moved to the neighboring one. The powered suits… kssshhh…happily stayed onboard to…ksshh…declare victory, so we blew them away…kssshhh…by setting alight the fuel pipes. Overall…ksshh…it wasn't a problem, but more importantly… kssshhh…why have you turned back? Kssshhh… Is there something you…ksshh…need?"

As he approached the sinking aircraft carrier, Quenser grabbed some wooden boxes and metal drums floating in the ocean.

"Electric pumps, tubes several meters long, bags to hold air, and some electrified coating powder. …I should be able to manage with what's here."

After grabbing what they needed, Quenser and the others turned right back toward the battlefield.

Meanwhile, he explained the plan forming in his mind.

When Heivia and Millia heard it, they smiled quietly in the water.

"I see. Quite a unique idea."

"Honestly, I'm not some detective. If you you'd told me right away, I wouldn't have been so worried."

After returning, the intelligence division soldiers took the equipment and scattered across the battlefield on Millia's orders.

The remaining three could only wait until those soldiers arrived in position.

In the meantime…

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“…?”

Quenser did not recognize this voice and it was using a different bandwidth. It was not being transmitted by the Legitimacy Kingdom, but nor was it from the Oriental Magic on the water’s surface. The powerful microwaves for the killer radar…no, for the wireless power transmission kept almost any communications from reaching the ocean.

In that case, where else could it be from?

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this.”

“The…Nataraja?”

Quenser’s words brought a harsh look to Heivia and Millia’s eyes too.

This could be their best chance to locate the Nataraja, but they did not have the appropriate equipment and they could not coordinate with the fleet or the Objects.

Did this person know that or not?

In fact, were they calculating the risks at all?

“I don’t know who you are, but why are you getting in our way? We aren’t trying to conquer the world or destroy the existing civilization. Yes, we wanted to be reborn. We will stop our hearts with cold sleep and be born anew when the breath of life returns to us. This planet will be the same. We will redo it all with the Nataraja. That is all.”

“And how much have you wasted for that selfish desire? How far have you moved the hands of the World Clock? There had to have been lives lost, too. That counts both the ones you eliminated because they were ‘in your way’ and the ones you’re using up on the surface. …You’re free to hope for some other place to live, but we’re going to make sure you make up for the damage you’ve done.”

“Hey, how long do you think this world will last?” asked the mocking voice. “The answer is it won’t last. It’s already ending. It sounds strange, but it’s true. The World Clock? That thing had

reached the end before we were even born. The world was done for from the moment the UN collapsed and the world map shattered like stained glass. Its heart has already stopped and the blood in its veins is only moving on inertia. That's the age we live in. A long-term space flight? That was nothing but Capitalist Corporations propaganda. The most they could do was bluff by making a ship in the desert that would never fly. Not even the VIPs devouring this planet were able to escape into space, so no one at all will be saved. All that remains is to see how long it takes for the planet to remember. It's already dead and it's only hope is to be reborn. Do you understand now, boy?"

"…"

"The Faith Organization, the Legitimacy Kingdom, the Information Alliance, and the Capitalist Corporations may look like solid new categories, but they're all frantically trying to cover up the contradictions and errors. For example, the Faith Organization contains every single religion. There's no way that would work. They either refuse to accept any other or see themselves at the top. When you gather those religions together, it only brings conflict. That's why they're constantly hoping for a common enemy to bring them all in line. If they don't find one, then they start an internal witch hunt that ends up burning each other at the stake. Lost Angels is just one obvious witches' forest, a breeding ground to safely secure the easiest internal troubles. And to be clear, that's just one example."

"…"

"By our estimations, we'll be lucky if the planet's anesthesia lasts for another two hundred years. There's no way it will last for three hundred. So there's no point in thinking about world domination. Once people lose all of their fuel and resources, they can't even wage war. Even Object maintenance relies on existing energy sources. All the desperately gathered water and food will start rotting on the edges and the explosive growth of saprophytic bacteria will reach the clothing, homes, forests, and mountains. Entire cities, countries, and continents will rot. And after the one type of saprophytic bacteria covers the world, it will be easily wiped out by a single cause. But this ending is one you all created yourselves. We have only shown you the future that awaits you. … That's all we've done, so why are you so persistent? You were the ones that created this destruction."

"…"

"You'll only be left with dried-out trash heaps that will never rot, but the rain and mist will turn them into a sticky world of sludge. That will prevent animals, plants, and even germs from reproducing. The ground will quickly decay with the sun blotted out and the supply of rain and air cut off. Of course, it's possible the sludge will become a new type of fuel if it's dried out, but that would be interesting, too. After all, the cities, countries, and continents would be covered in piles of solid fuel. Even a tiny spark from friction or static electricity would set a continent ablaze. Forest fires spread at about fifty kph, but this would be much faster. It would devour the people like an underground pack of beasts."

The world had no chance left.

The current age saw war as normal.

The population had grown without control, no one seriously tried to conserve no matter what they claimed, they greedily consumed the food supplies, they erased forests for their own luxury, they were about to tap out the resources, they were ignoring all non-war technological development, and they were losing themselves in the fighting while looking away from all else. Winning or losing would not save anyone, but the soldiers were still obsessed with victory as if only to get the right brain chemicals pumping and the civilians mocked others for not thinking for themselves while they themselves blindly accepted the information they were given.

The planet was overflowing with those things.

This was the age *after* the World Clock's hands had reached the end.

So they would reset it all.

They would turn back the hands of the clock.

They were not doing anything as savage as carrying out a mass slaughter. This was more than just stealing fuel and resources so the rest of the world would dry up. Unusably massive amounts of solid fuel would cover the world and the fires on the earth's surface would chase the fleeing people to the edges of the continents. They would not be killed because there was not a drop left. They would be killed because they drowned in it all. It was a frightening reversal.

And after considering what that meant and weighing it against the current age, Quenser Barbotage gave his answer.

“Give it a rest, you brat. Your delusions don’t matter.”

He heard someone gasp on the other end of the radio.

But not at the fact that Quenser had spoken.

Yes, Quenser had seen through this unseen individual and determined they were a “brat”.

And he continued.

“Are you in middle school? No, you’re even younger. You talk with an air of importance and you might have a machine altering your voice, but you’re actually around ten I bet. That was obvious enough after I heard this great plan of yours. If a brat like you is the leader, were all the adult geniuses considered expendable?”

“Wh-wha…?”

“You want to go somewhere else? Who is it that says they want that? Who is it that says the world is filthy and the adults are ugly, yet tries to run off without working to resolve all that in your own generation? With cold sleep, an artificial planet, and escaping the earth, your actual methods are on a huge scale, but it all comes down to the childish reasoning that wants to abandon all responsibility. You think we’ll all die off without you having to do anything, but that just means you think someone will eventually make your dream come true. …Don’t look down on this world, you brat. Thinking you can get away with anything because you’re a kid is just more childish logic.”

Quenser spat the words out.

“Listen. It only looks like kids get away with what they do because, unbeknownst to you, someone else is covering for you. It’ll be your parents, your teachers, or one of the other adults you hate so much. So you can’t use your special privileges forever. Once the adults can’t cover for you anymore, it’ll all come crashing down on you. … To sum it up, you’ve gone too far and now it’s time to pay the piper.”

“Don’t joke.”

The voice grew lower than before.

What would these oozing, sticky words have sounded like without the alteration?

“They were covering for us? *Them!?* Don’t joke!! You have no idea what kind of environment we came from!!”

“So what?”

“You saw Lost Angels, didn’t you? But that’s only the model room version of a criminal city created for Faith Organization propaganda. They faked it as a convenient example of what happens when people lose their faith. The real thing is nothing like that. You haven’t even seen the tip of the iceberg when it comes to real malice!!”

“What does that matter?”

It was true that just hearing about talent trafficking made it impossible to imagine the kind of ugly benefits and smirking adults that had surrounded the geniuses that went to the Nataraja. And that was probably only one small portion of it.

But…

Even so…

“From the moment you thought you could unconditionally trample on other people’s convenience for your own convenience and not let them complain, you proved you’re just some brat. If you were just swinging a stick around, someone would have taken the blame for you, but once you’ve gone this far, no one’s going to cover for you. You brought this all on yourself.”

“Like I said…”

Something caused an odd sound on the other end of the radio transmission.

“Nothing that convenient actually exists in this world!!!”

“It’s the very fact that you can’t see it that makes you a hopeless brat.”

Escaping earth.

Going somewhere else.

Finding a world with no ugly adults where they were the oldest.

“You can cry, but I won’t forgive you,” said Quenser indifferently. “There aren’t any chances left in your life.”

They had predicted that the Nataraja project was split between the cold sleep group that actually boarded the artificial planet and waited for the next earth and the surface group that would fight to keep the artificial planet hidden.

The surface group was willing to die and they were likely motivated by guilt.

They had seen the children’s dream and it was so bright that those adults cursed how small they themselves were.

That probably explained it all.

It went beyond the ugly leaders that the young geniuses considered their enemy. They saw everyone but themselves as ugly and had no problem eliminating them. That included the adult geniuses who had grown up under the same circumstances. They kicked them down, laughed, and said it was their just deserts. This was a war brought about by those childish dictators.

Quenser reached a new understanding of the situation.

From the middle of the battlefield, he mercilessly presented the truth to the mastermind who claimed he could keep things clean because he had not dirtied his hands.

“I will destroy it all. If you want to dream of the stars, then curl up with your pillow, cold sleeper.”

Part 19

A muffled popping rang out.

It may have been an earsplitting explosion above the water, but not to Quenser and the others under the water.

“Acting tough to that brat is great and all, but is there really anything we can do!?”

“Didn’t I explain it to you already?”

Quenser let go of what he held.

It was a plastic bag full of air.

Millia operated a battery-powered electric pump. The tube attached to it extended out from the ocean’s surface like a snorkel.

One after another, round inflated bags rose toward the surface like helium balloons.

As soon as they were exposed to the air, the powerful microwaves roasted them and caused them to burst.

The intelligence division members would be doing the same thing elsewhere.

“My men say they’ve distributed the proper amount!”

“Then let’s do the rest as planned!!”

Quenser controlled his small submersible. The wire attached to the back was connected with rubber adhesive to the spear floating near the surface.

Quenser, Heivia, and Millia moved in different directions.

They each pulled a spear around with a wire.

“Anything you do is a waste of time.”

The same unfamiliar voice came from the radio.

It belonged to the mastermind on the Nataraja.

“The Second Generation Kali on the surface will not die. Surely you’ve noticed the three-body problem by now. Combining that with optical refraction technology neutralizes the ballistic calculations of any main cannon. As long as the Kali continues disturbing this area, we can freely swim through the dark ocean!!”

“Did you want me to agree with you? This isn’t a customer service center, so I’m not about to say anything that would calm you

down."

"We won't lose!!"

"The three-body problem isn't as perfect a defense system as you claim it is."

As soon as Quenser said that, he heard a tremendous explosion and something tore into the Oriental Magic's spherical body.

"Quenser! I have a report from the 'periscope'. The Princess's low-stability plasma cannon got a clean hit on the Oriental Magic! Another two or three hits and it'll sink!!"

"Did you hear that? What do you have to say now?"

"Impossible…! It doesn't add up… No, we set up the three-body problem so it *wouldn't* add up, so how did you find the answer!?"

"It's called the restricted three-body problem." Quenser laughed. "You can't accurately calculate the influence of three or more astronomical bodies pulling on each other. That's the three-body problem. But that's not true under certain exceptional conditions. For example, if three bodies with identical pull are arranged at the vertices of an equilateral triangle or if they're all lined up. That's the restricted three-body problem. You don't need a huge supercomputer for that. A simple formula gives you the answer and the very first shell will hit."

"That isn't the issue. Are you saying you kept waiting until the conditions just so happened to fit the restricted three-body problem?"

"No. We could always connect submersibles to the 'spears' with wires and drag them around. By putting each one in the proper position for an equilateral triangle or a line, it raises the odds a bit."

"No, not that!! Which 'spears' were turned on and off was determined randomly. Just because you positioned some of the 'spears' in an equilateral triangle or a line doesn't mean those three will actually be used."

"Of course," Quenser readily admitted. But he was not done. "But the random number generation of whack-a-mole is way easier to analyze than the three-body problem. We only had to give each 'spear' a number and send their positions to the Princess and Putana

up above. We bet it all on the genius brains of those Pilot Elites."

"You communicated with them? But the wireless power microwaves would have kept you from…"

The voice trailed off and seemed to realize something.

"Oh, those popping sounds. You sent something to the surface, didn't you!? Did you create a simple signal of zeroes and ones using the presence or absence of that popping!?"

The student did not answer the question.

He said something else instead.

"As long as the Oriental Magic is stopped, the ability to search the Indian Ocean returns to normal. We'll know the second something ten thousand meters long starts moving. Checkmate, brat."

"I wouldn't be so sure." The mastermind slowly breathed out. "Even if you have eliminated the three-body problem defense, you haven't actually sunk the Oriental Magic. This isn't over yet."

"It's two against one."

"But one of them is worn out after continually evading for so long. We only have to target that one."

"Does the Princess look that weak to you?"

"No," said the mastermind. "But the thoughtless and naïve try to protect their allies. That's why the newcomer will die first."

A massive pillar of air bubbles appeared far in the distance. It looked like a white cascade, but it came from something over fifty meters tall sinking further and further down.

Underwater, nothing should have been visible beyond a few hundred meters, but Quenser still clearly saw the monstrous weapon sinking into the sea. That was just how big it was.

This was not the Princess.

In addition to the strategic weapons, it included a distinctive road roller and cultivator.

"Putana!!"

There was nothing he could do.

He could not reach her by stretching out his hand. And even if he could, his arms could not support something that weighed two hundred thousand tons.

He could only watch as the mass of metal sank into the dark, dark depths of the ocean with the brown girl closed inside.

“Ha ha ha ha ha!! Seems like it worked. And now it’s one against one, so it isn’t so easy to say who will win! And let’s not forget that your Elite is exhausted!”

“…”

He had known that this could be the result whenever someone stood on the battlefield or an Object was sent out.

But…

“I’ll kill you, you brat!!!!”

“How!? You can’t rely on your precious Objects. Or are you going to head out into the vortex of microwaves to face the Kali yourself?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Quenser clenched his teeth and spat the words out like mud.

“Everything is set up now, you brat.”

“What…?”

Someone else spoke as soon as the mastermind trailed off.

“Quenser, I have a report from the ‘periscope’! The dust collector effect is working and it’s covering the surface of the ‘spears’!!”

“This is Millia. I’m hearing the same thing. It seems to be altering the direction of the microwaves being scattered everywhere. The plan was a success.”

Someone cut in.

It was the Nataraja’s mastermind.

“What…? What did you do now?”

“We made a dust collector,” said Quenser. “That’s the technology that removes dust from air ducts or blows powder coating onto metal panels. It mostly uses static electricity and electrified particles, but have you figured out what this means yet?”

“You don’t mean…”

“The aircraft carrier had tons of electrified powder coating for fire resistance. It’s probably made by breaking down the materials for blast furnace walls, but that was all we needed.”

“You mean what you sent to the surface wasn’t just a primitive signal to the Objects? It also scattered that powder coating across the ocean!?”

“The dust collector effect sent the floating powder coating to the ‘spears’. More accurately, it covered the disk-shaped antennae for receiving power.”

The scorching answer session continued.

“Those antennae were meant to collect the microwaves and convert them into power, but they were transformed into electromagnetic mirrors that reflect the microwaves. And funnily enough, the antennae were made to change direction like a sunflower to more efficiently collect the microwaves. …Simply put, they’re all set to constantly follow the Oriental Magic.”

“Oh, no! That’s what you did!?”

The mastermind seemed to have realized something, but it was too late.

For one thing, the Nataraja was at the bottom of the ocean and would have no way of directly contacting the Oriental Magic on the surface. That was all thanks to those microwaves.

And that meant nothing he could do would make it in time.

“Hey, what do you think will happen if the full power of the microwaves that Object is emitting is concentrated on a single point? Those electromagnetic waves are powerful enough to negatively affect life at thirty kilometers and to cause a slaughter at ten kilometers. Wouldn’t that energy far exceed your average main cannon?”

A brilliant flash of light surged out.

Visible light was a portion of electromagnetic waves, but focusing microwaves would never give them a visible wavelength.

That light came from the Oriental Magic melting as it turned red and scattered sparks due to its own massive microwaves.

That light signaled the destruction of the ultra thick armor that could withstand a nuclear blast.

An enormous mass plunged into the ocean in the distance. It had lost its original form and become a fluid, but it still sank into the deep, deep depths just as Putana had.

At the same time, the communications grew clearer.

The Princess's voice arrived from the Baby Magnum which was the only Object remaining on the surface.

"It's over. I'd like you to explain later what exactly happened, though."

"Sure thing. We can talk till morning in your room."

Even as he made his carefree comment, Quenser glared deep into the ocean.

The naked eye could not see into that deep darkness, but he spat some words into those depths.

"Now there's no one left to protect you."

"Ah…ah…"

"So there's no one left to protect your dream. The next time you open your eyes, you won't be in the paradise you'd imagined. You'll wake up to just another morning in a world beyond the end of the World Clock where common evils and unfairness run rampant."

"Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!
Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

Real_Time_Log.

Network_System_From_“Shuttle_NATARAJA”.

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this! It wasn’t supposed to be like this!!”

“Quit shouting.”

“Get the Nataraja moving right now! The Indian Ocean is too dangerous! We need to get out of here!!”

“With the Kali destroyed, we can’t keep the ocean electromagnetically locked down. If something this big moves through the water, it will be detected immediately. We can only stay put.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this!! O-oh, I know. If all we can do is wait and the Nataraja is done for, we need to escape as soon as-…!!”

“Do you really think we can? Now that the preparations for cold sleep have begun, we can’t leave until the process is complete. Ending it midway will cause your body’s cells to rupture.”

“Shut up!!”

“…?”

“That just means we have to buy some time. If we contact some adults who we can let know about the Nataraja and invite them along with us, we can get the soldiers fighting with each other and use the confusion to retreat to some other part of the ocean. So there’s nothing to worry about. We only have to abandon the adults in the very end. Only we’re allowed on the Nataraja. Only us.”

Kssshhh!!

Kssssssssshhhhhhhhhh! Kssshhh!! Kssshhhh!!

Kssssshhhhh!!

“What…was that!?”

“It wasn’t in the software. It was hardware trouble. There’s a large burden on…you’re kidding…”

“What is it!? It wasn’t supposed to…”

“An incredible mass is bearing down on the Nataraja! Its estimated weight is two hundred thousand tons!! Could this be…!?”

Caution.

This_connection_has_an_irregular_password.

“I finally arrived. You can’t pull off a vanishing act with an entire Object on top of you, can you? Just because you’re ten kilometers long doesn’t mean you can take a hit from a two hundred thousand ton meteor without issue. Having the force concentrated on a single high heel is painful, isn’t it?”

“Who…are you!? Did you use a powerful enough signal to break through the cosmic ray shielding and access the internal radio network from outside!?”

“Outside!? That couldn’t be. How powerful do you think the water pressure is out there!?”

“I’m in the Object you sunk. Is calling it the Sarasvati enough for you to understand? Ahh, it feels so great being able to say what I want without being so formal all the time. The military is exhausting.”

“After you were sunk…you fell all the way down here!?”

“Maybe it’s because I’m an Elite, but I don’t like being stuck on the receiving end of everything.”

“What…is this?”

“So I’ll do what I know you least want me to do.”

Kssssshhhhh!!

Kssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhhh!!

Kssssshhhhh!!

“What is this!? There’s a powerful laser beam directed toward the surface!!”

“Now the Legitimacy Kingdom knows where you are. And as long as I’m holding you down, you can’t run off anywhere.”

“I-it wasn’t supposed to…”

“Let’s both wait as long as it takes. Let’s wait for the people who are sure to come save us even in this extreme water pressure.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like thiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiissssssssssssssssssssssssssssssss!!”

Epilogue

Quenser stood on the deck of one of the fleet's supply ships.

He leaned on the metal railing and stared off into the shining blue sea.

"That was pretty crazy."

The sounds of a moving crane accompanied his words.

A small submarine floated in the ocean directly below and it was attached to a thick tube from the supply ship. It was not receiving water or fuel. Instead, the fuel stored inside the submarine was being sucked out.

No, not even that was entirely accurate.

Technically, it was the fuel taken from the side of the Nataraja as it sat on the ocean bottom two thousand meters down.

"Putana apparently swung around her main cannon and road roller to choose where she landed after sinking. That took her right on top of the Nataraja. Pilot Elites are all so scary. They must think on an entirely different scale."

He was speaking to the Princess who stood next to him.

She replied while giving the seabirds breadcrumbs she must have brought from her cockpit's supplies.

"You just don't have enough of a fighting spirit, Quenser."

"Eh? What? You're on her side!?"

The supplies inside the Nataraja were being returned to the Legitimacy Kingdom, Information Alliance, Capitalist Corporations, and Faith Organization.

The fossil fuels were simple to deal with, but the Nataraja's own structures would eventually be dismantled, melted, broken down, and finally returned to their rightful owners. Quenser could not even imagine when the work would be complete. In all seriousness, it was like the creation of a new undersea mine on a global scale.

Even the genius children who had rebelled would be returned.

“Those brats said the world has already ended. They said the hands of the World Clock had reached the end before we were even born.”

“…”

“They said it was a matter of when we would realize it. They claimed we would remember we were dead in the next two hundred years.”

There were countless problems.

They were all intertwined and they would be difficult to untangle.

And while they resolved one problem, another four or five would rise from the chaos.

But the Princess gave her answer with emotionless eyes.

“So what?”

“Yeah. That’s the proper reaction.”

Overly tidy people sometimes did not notice their own messy hair.

Even if those children had risen from the sea after mankind’s destruction and terraformed a burned continent with plants and microbes they had preserved, they probably would not have created the utopia they hoped for.

They would have created the same sort of society with some of the positions shifted around a bit.

Take the present for example.

No one got along and war was an everyday occurrence, but when everyone’s interests aligned, the world powers would put on forced smiles and push for a path of cooperation.

They had all been children once and now they were adults.

That was all there was to it.

“I don’t think the world will end in two hundred years,” said the Princess.

“?”

“But in two hundred years, I think the world will have become something we could never imagine.”

“Probably. If humans were the kind of creature to give up and let themselves be destroyed, the world never would have ended up like this.”

“Do you really understand what ‘the world’ is?”

“Of course not. After all, the world is waiting for me in the future. I’ll become an Object designer and look down on it from the top floor of a skyscraper with a champagne glass in one hand.”

Fleets from the other world powers had arrived and similarly retrieved resources from the Nataraja.

They would almost certainly use those resources to wage new wars.

Or maybe someone would try to avoid that by sending an Object to attack the returning transport fleets.

As oil reserve estimates were corrected and new technology reduced the consumption rate, the hands of the World Clock would move forward or back quite easily. The colossal ship at the bottom of the ocean would become a new basis for a countdown to replace the old countdown based on the tapped out deposits around the world.

And thus, the world continued to change, bit by bit.

It travelled down such a complex path that it was impossible to tell who wanted it to head in that direction.

So…

“We at least have to do our best to make sure the world isn’t an ugly place in two hundred years’ time.”

Frolaytia Capistrano used her laptop’s camera to speak with a superior officer waiting in a distant safe country.

“You all have a way of digging up these bizarre international problems, don’t you?” asked the officer.

“What scares me is that some people might think those boys are actually diligent soldiers.”

“But all this business with geniuses really makes you think, doesn’t it? It’s simple enough to say you hate liars, losers, thugs, and selfish people, but just swinging around a stick isn’t going to do anything about it. You won’t change the world and you’ll have your corners removed as you’re rounded off like stone in the river. But they had the strength needed to fight that flow.”

The officer seemed to be enjoying himself.

Or perhaps a soldier who never set foot on the battlefield needed the flexibility of mind to turn any situation into a positive.

“But at the same time, this was an opportunity for us. This Nataraja incident let us divide the geniuses between the usable and the unusable, between the safe and the unsafe. It’s a lot like the good and evil gods the Faith Organization sometimes talks about. We know who to make offerings to and who to seal away, and that means a lot.”

“But given the recent technology race, I doubt the masterminds will be executed. While they are dangerous, they have the brains needed to pull something like that off.”

“That’s why they’re evil gods, not demons. You fear and yet revere them. Although that might be a tragedy for them and not salvation,” smoothly added the officer. “It seems the Island Nation has a tradition of worshiping unmanageable evil spirits as gods, but this may be similar. Malice only needs a shrine to contain it. And the system used to utilize these malicious geniuses will probably look bizarre to any normal person. In fact, they would probably see it as a fate worse than death.”

“Doing that is not the military’s job.”

“Ha ha. That’s true. You can end the conversation by saying they brought it upon themselves, but the world really is extremely cruelly made.”

Human history was already over.

They would remember that within two hundred years and it would all crumble away once they did.

Those geniuses had experienced something that made them think that.

They had been presented with all sorts of ugly data to solve the problems at hand and it had led them to give up on Planet Earth.

“Even I sometimes wonder if this world should have been destroyed long ago,” said the officer.

“…”

“I wonder if the curtains of history should have been gallantly lowered as soon as something as bizarre as the collapse of the UN occurred. I wonder if everything’s been coasting on inertia ever since and there’s no chance of a bright future remaining.”

“But our history is what has continued afterwards. And now that it has continued, we can’t exactly throw in the towel.”

“Yeah, that is true. But aren’t you saying that thinking is too much of a pain, so you’re giving up? That too is childish reasoning.”

The old maintenance lady operated her notebook-sized tablet while checking on the damage to the Baby Magnum. The onion armor always had to be replaced, but the damage this time was far from light.

While performing her work, she spoke to the brown girl next to her.

“Are you sure that was what you wanted?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I suggested you detonate the Collective Farming’s reactor in exchange for helping us, but you didn’t actually do it.”

The girl in a green nurse-like special suit shrugged at that question.

That had been an option at that time and in that place.

She could not have escaped and would have been caught in the blast, but she could have kept the Legitimacy Kingdom from analyzing the technology any further if she had detonated the Sarasvati.

She could have offered up the Sarasvati.

And if the stolen resources in the Nataraja had been lost in the Sarasvati's explosion, the world powers may have been unable to keep up appearances and may have rotted away in despair. Beginning with the extinction of the saprophytic bacteria, the continents would have been buried in seemingly living flames created by the sludge and solid fuel covering the world.

That may have let her take revenge against the Legitimacy Kingdom for taking everything from her and it may have had the greatest anesthetic effect on her suicidal desire.

But the brown girl had not done it.

She had wanted to see what came next.

She had likely found something that made her think that way.

"I only did what I needed to."

"Yes, but not many people can do that in such an extreme environment."

The Sarasvati remained on the bottom of the ocean, but the Legitimacy Kingdom apparently intended to send an underwater drone to continue analyzing the technology. Another project would use underwater arc cutting to slice away the components and retrieve them, bit by bit.

Once the Legitimacy Kingdom fully absorbed the technology, Putana might be summoned as the Pilot Elite for an Object based on it.

Of course, the Legitimacy Kingdom and the Faith Organization were in the middle of an international trial over who owned the Sarasvati, while the Information Alliance and Capitalist Corporations wanted to interfere. There was no guarantee it would all go as planned.

"What do you intend to do now?" asked the old lady.

"For now, I'll be going somewhere beyond the Faith Organization's reach. I was custom made with military secrets, so I will probably be sent to a laboratory that deals with Elites."

“I see. I heard Millia wanted you.”

“That wouldn’t have been bad either.”

The old lady received a text message summons on her tablet.

It was from Frolaytia.

Frolaytia was busy putting together the paperwork for the higher ups who leisurely sat around in the safe countries. If she needed the old lady’s help, she probably needed detailed data on the condition of the Baby Magnum or the Princess.

The old lady left the rest of the work to her maintenance soldier subordinates and started toward the motorboat that would take her to the small aircraft carrier holding the high ranking officer.

On the way, she turned back to speak.

“Oh, right. I forgot to say one thing.”

“What is it?”

“Thanks for not giving up on the current world.”

Putana Highball’s emotionless eyes softened a bit at that.

“I should be thanking you. It was your words that showed me a wider world.”

Afterword

Doryahh! We're finally at Volume 9!!

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

This may be sudden, but I have a habit of intentionally leaving black boxes in my series. It's less of a technique and more of a product of my writing process. In Heavy Object, the protagonists move between battlefields around the world, but their everyday lives are left vague (for example, what level of technology their music players are at) and the biggest example is the safe countries. Most likely, everyone who has read this series has their own idea of the safe countries, ranging from the setting of a normal school life story to that of a serious near-future SF story.

For these black boxes, I have an actual setting in mind, but I never actually reveal it. The black boxes can really relieve the author's mental pressure. After all, it leaves room for creating a side story at any time. You can think of it like a heroine's hair. If it's long, you can give them a different impression by toying with the hairstyle, but if it's short, you can't play with it like that.

This volume focused on a safe country, but – as everyone who has read the book knows – it was mostly filled with foreign spies and the Faith Organization intentionally caused the law and order to decay in order to create a model case for a city of crime. It was far removed from the normal safe countries.

Some of the readers might be wondering why I would do something so strange, but cutting some things out like that leaves the flexibility to fit many different ideas inside the series. That's the wonderful thing about those black boxes.

Anyway, this story was set in a single city, so the each chapter focused on the passage of time instead of a change of setting. I think Putana's position was the most obvious example, but actions of Mustard Cowboy Leader George Coral and the other residents of the city were constantly changing.

The residents given in **bold** may have interacted with the protagonists and may not have, but that was to make it feel like one

big city. I constructed the story so you could find out what happened to them or who they really were as you read each consecutive chapter. I couldn't do it this time, but it might have been fun to show different sides of the city by dividing the chapters up by morning, noon, and night.

Also, spending an entire volume on the Faith Organization might be pretty rare. The Objects were based on Hinduism. The previous novel Festival of Death already had an Object with the name of Ratri, the goddess of the night. The legends say all of the stars in the night sky are her eyes, so you can see how Hindu legends are a wonderful treasure trove for things that appeal very, very, very much to the chuuni mind. This volume included Sarasvati, Garuda, Kali, and Nataraja. If you're interested, it might be amusing to look into them. It should be about three times more appealing than what you're expecting.

Unlike the Princess or the Oh Ho Ho, Putana Highball is the kind of Elite whose skills can be used in direct combat as well. The other two Elites are unbeatable in their Objects, but they can be dealt with if you aim a gun at them while they're outside of their Objects. That will not work with Putana. As you would expect of the Faith Organization, she has constructed a method based on her faith that keeps her from betraying anything.

On that note, the most dangerous person in this series might be Mariydi Whitewitch who has the same specs as an Elite but isn't bound like an Elite. She can't defeat an Object, but I think she would be a thorough pain in the butt if she infiltrated the enemy safe country controlling the Object.

It may be because they're used to dealing with the Princess, another Elite, but an important point is how the comments by Quenser and the old maintenance lady stabbed directly into Putana. I wanted to show through Putana that they have an understanding of all Elites (who are a symbol of awe in a way) as human beings, but what did you think?

The theme of the masterminds here was "somewhere else".

It can take many different forms: an overseas trip, beyond the solar

system, the home of the gods, simply running away from home, into your dreams, a special job such as in show business, reincarnation, an alternate fantasy world, and maybe virtual reality too? The desire itself is pretty popular. This series takes place in an age with villas on the moon, but I put together the story while thinking that wouldn't stop people from dreaming of falling asleep on a crescent moon bench.

Then again, this is Heavy Object. When you add this series' flavor to a popular desire, it ends up like this.

Some readers might have been excited by the sudden introduction of the term "artificial planet", but even the Collective Farming in Chapter 1 had its beginnings in the terraforming technology that can create a livable environment on the moon or Mars. Of course, it was being used for the Re Terra project to reclaim the earth's undesirable environments such as deserts instead of going to other planets.

The other theme this time was genius boys and girls. And not just as allies to consult with or targets of protection. They can become pure enemies as well. But when you think about it, they're human, so it seems to me there's going to be good ones and bad ones. Unconditionally rejecting someone's malice feels like turning them into a doll to me.

The Hindu coloring to this volume was to use the polytheistic motif to highlight the idea of kind geniuses and frightening geniuses. Of course, it was wrong of Quenser to decide not to judge geniuses by his standards because he couldn't know what they are thinking.

The masterminds here became malevolent gods, but they might have traveled a different path had they had someone like the old maintenance lady is to the Princess.

I intentionally omitted most of the descriptions of the adults who had decided to destroy themselves when faced with the children's dream. But if you think about their position, it seems to fit their style best for them to speak with their backs instead of their words. If you follow the story from their point of view, it might have a somewhat bittersweet structure.

Speaking of technological geniuses, the series has already shown Sladder Honeysuckle in Adoption War and Claire Whist in Path to the Third Generation. Compare this to them, and you might see

what position geniuses hold in the series. It really is like the good and evil gods of polytheism. Quenser uses his skills to destroy Objects and protect the social system, so from the polytheistic perspective, is it possible he could grow into the same position as a god of destruction?

I give my thanks to my illustrator, Nagi Ryou-san, and my editors, Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anan-san. Everyone ended up in normal clothes most of the time and I think that alone caused trouble on the design side. Thank you very much.

And I also give my thanks to the readers. What did you think of this story structure that began in a city of organized crime and ended up in a battle against an Object? There are still a lot of curveballs I want to use that fall outside “the usual”, so it would help a lot if you stuck with me for quite a while yet.

And I will end this here.

I hope this book will remain in your heart in some way.

The term Hand Axe never actually showed up even once.

-Kamachi Kazuma

Heavy Object - Volume 09
— Judgement -195˚C

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